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WILLIAM COOK
ANTIQUÉ DEALER

By the Same Author
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WILLIAM COOK
ANTIQUE DEALER

BY

RICHARD KEVERNE

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WILLIAM COOK

ANTIQUE DEALER

PART I

CHAPTER I

I

To most of the summer visitors at the little Belgian plage of St. Gules, old Jean, of the Natation Café, was as familiar as the grey-green sea itself, or the great sand dunes amid which the quaint old place was built.

Jean was a local character, an odd job man with mysterious occupations, but a regular waiter at the café on the beach during the summer season. The natives mistrusted and disliked him. But that was because he was a foreigner. A Frenchman some said, others a German or a Scandinavian. And Jean kept himself very much to himself, and returned the local hatred with interest.

He said very little : he never explained his frequent absences, though the whole fishing quarter jeered at him and said he had been in gaol. Only now and again they could rouse him to retort, and then his epithets would rival theirs in savage insult. So they grew a little afraid of Jean, and learned to leave him alone.

Portly, blonde Mme. Levasseur, of the Natation, shared the common hostility, but she was too keen a business woman to express it. Jean was a good workman and cheap. She could beat him down every time, which she could not do when she tried to haggle

with her own people. And Jean, in his wooden, surly way seemed to understand the English, who were responsible for the fattening of the Levasseur money-bags each season.

Not that Jean spoke their language, but he was resentfully patient with their stupid jokes and their preposterous requests. Madame often thought that Jean was so easy about wages because he made such a good thing out of the fool English. But Madame was always polite to the English. What would you? Without them where would trade be?

That was why, when M. Culver drifted into the Natation one August afternoon and inquired, in his execrable French, what had happened to old Jean, that Mme. Levasseur feigned an intense sympathy. M. Culver was an old customer who came year after year. He paid well, and, for an Englishman, was very "gentil."

"Poor Jean!" Madame exclaimed. "Oh, how I am sorry! He is ill, these few days past. It is the heart, I think. Such a good fellow!"

Richard Culver tried to explain jocularly, in French, that he never believed Jean had a heart. "I always thought he was a mummy," he laboured out. "You know, madame, like Pharaoh."

Madame did not know, but she smiled agreeably, and after his glass of beer, Culver asked for Jean's address.

"I'll go and call on the old pirate," he said. "The Natation without Jean is—is—a different place, madame," he explained.

Madame said, "But, certainly, monsieur," and began to take a more sincere interest in the old fellow's recovery. Jean loomed now as a bigger asset.

Dick Culver lounged off, through the afternoon heat, towards the harbour. For no particular reason he felt sorry about Jean. He was a queer, old thing,

and so much part and parcel of St. Gules. Culver had known him for five years; he always looked forward to ragging him when he came to the Natation; and it flattered him, too, to realise that he had managed to get nearer to this surly old waiter than most visitors.

Jean would listen to him when he stumbled on in his indifferent French. Sometimes he had asked him questions about England. And Jean had permitted Culver to sketch him.

This was a signal honour. St. Gules was popular with artists, and Jean continually received invitations to pose. He refused them all roughly, contemptuously, and with angry words. Yet last year, when Culver had suggested making a sketch of him, the old man had broken off in the midst of his usual refusal, shrugged his shoulders, and exclaimed, in his rude accent: "If you want to—and will tell no one."

And Culver had made a clever, careful portrait. "The Pirate" he always called it to himself, for there was something about old Jean that suggested a violent past. There was an alert suspicion in the brown eyes, which seemed to veil a life of mystery. The old scar across the right cheek-bone might have come from a cutlass, the stiff leg with which he walked was suggestive; his dark hair and swarthy, weather-beaten face marked him more as a seaman than a café waiter.

Tall, lithe, wiry, independent, Culver could always imagine Jean, a coloured handkerchief about his head, swarming up the rigging with a knife in his teeth.

Dick Culver came to the open door of a white-washed cottage by the harbour side, and called out: "Hallo there! Does Jean of the Natation live here?"

A dark-haired, virago of a woman disengaged herself from a knot of peasants chattering noisily on the neighbouring quay.

"Yes, he does. And what do you want with the lazy good-for-nothing?" she snapped at him. "And how is he going to pay his rent, staying indoors all day saying he is ill? Tell me that? Ill! He's not ill—the lazy one!"

Culver smiled blandly, mainly because he had missed the greater part of the spitfire's outburst.

"I want to see him," he said amicably.

"In the upstairs room," the woman said, with impatience, and turned back to her neighbours.

Culver climbed a steep ladder-like staircase.

"You in here, Monsieur Jean, *le pirate?*" he called out cheerily. "This is Monsieur Culver, you remember him? Come to see what's the matter."

II

That Jean was seriously ill was immediately plain. The old man was lying, fully dressed, on a low truckle bed. His face was mask-like, his skin brown and wrinkled as a shrivelled pear. He spoke with an effort, rudely and hostilely.

"I don't know you. Why do you come here?" he growled.

Culver jollied him.

"Who's to look after me at the café if you stay sulking in your bunk?" he asked. Then, with an odd tenderness: "Look here, Jean, what's up; are you really ill?"

But the man would not respond, merely shifting his deep-set eyes, in gloomy suspicion, to Culver's face, then back again to the damp-stained wall.

"Nothing's the matter," he answered at last. "What do you want with me?"

Culver made another effort to gain the surly fellow's confidence. But it was no good. He gave up, and, with a cheery "Good-bye," went downstairs to seek the garrulous, acid-tongued woman.

She was waiting for him. Once again she burst into an angry denunciation of that lazy good-for-nothing upstairs. Culver checked her in the way he knew to be the most effective with the Flemish peasant. He spoke of money.

"How much is it that he owes you?" he asked brusquely.

The woman became immediately placatory. Of course, if monsieur were going to pay, it was another matter. But she was a poor, hard-working widow with children to bring up, and she must think of them first.

"Naturally," Culver said, with a shrug; "but how much is it?"

After a rapid calculation, the woman named a pitifully small sum when translated into English currency. Culver marvelled at the hardness of these people, who would blackguard an ill man for a matter of about eighteen shillings.

He gave her three hundred francs, and told her that would clear off the debt and pay the old man's bills for some time to come.

"Now see that you look after him properly," he said sternly.

The woman was cowed, murmuring "*Oui, m'sieu; oui, m'sieu,*" as she fingered the notes greedily.

"And you are to get a doctor in to him," Culver went on. "I shall pay. I'll come again to-morrow and hear what the doctor said." He left with a parting shot: "Look after Jean well and you shall be paid well." And he wandered back to the beach in a curiously sad mood.

III

Richard Culver was a lonely man himself. He made acquaintances easily enough, but friends seldom.

There was something in old Jean's plight that appealed to his sympathy. To lie ill, perhaps dying, amid people who hated you, struck him as being the saddest end to any life.

And Culver, recently, had had a stroke of good fortune; perhaps that helped to sharpen his sympathy for one who appeared to have had none at all.

A gamble on the Stock Exchange, in which he had risked the whole of his small capital, had come off. In a spectacular boom of Kwaga rubber shares he had turned twelve hundred pounds into over nine thousand. Nine thousand pounds meant that he need not worry for a year or two. He could settle down somewhere, in comfort, and write the books he wanted to write, and not be tied to hack journalism for eleven months each year.

For Dick Culver had never followed any settled profession. When he came out of the army he had gone into a stockbroker's office with an old friend of his father's. A year of the City had nearly broken his heart.

He gave up that job and tried painting, for which he had an amateur *flair*. But he soon realised that there was no career for him in art. Then he drifted into journalism, wrote a couple of unsuccessful novels, and found himself past his thirtieth birthday, full of unfulfilled ambitions and tied down to a life of hard, but undistinguished, work from which he could see no escape. But now he was free.

Yet, as he wandered, thoughtfully, along the boarded promenade of St. Gules' Plage, he was feeling a little disappointed. His rather serious grey eyes were wrinkled at the corners, and he hurried his pace, as he was apt to do when lost in thought. Life was not panning out as he had dreamed it would.

He had come to St. Gules the day before, on the impulse of a moment, and because he had been there

so often. It would be rather jolly, he thought, to spend a luxurious week at the Grande Hotel on the sea-front and not have to worry about his bill. Afterwards he would travel until the autumn.

But he found the hotel crowded and not nearly so comfortable as the Trois Poissons in the town where he used to stay, and when he had wandered down to the Natation Café, that seemed changed, too, without old Jean.

Culver flung his six feet of muscular manhood down upon the warm sand and let the hot August sun beat down upon his unruly fair hair while he tried to diagnose his hump.

He was not naturally moody, and a glistening sea soon tempted him to a better occupation than introspection, and sent him, feeling fit and happier, back to the Natation for tea after a joyous swim. And Fate sent to him, on the little *terrasse* by the broad walk, Phil Norman, the landscape painter, who had a cottage in the fishing town overlooking the Mole, whom he had frequently met both here and in town. Life seemed good again.

They dined together that night and joined a merry party at the Casino afterwards. For the time being old Jean passed out of Culver's mind, and when he remembered the old man he did so with a touch of shame.

IV

Culver passed the Natation on his way back from a before-breakfast bathe a couple of mornings later. Mme. Levasseur saw him, and came fluttering out from the café, calling him by name.

"Monsieur Culver," she cried in agitation, "Madeleine has been asking for you. Poor Jean, he is very ill; he is dying; he wants to see you at once. You will go? It would be an act of mercy."

Culver nodded, and broke into a run towards the port. He felt terribly guilty for having forgotten the old man; it seemed so mean and selfish.

He found Madelaine and several neighbours in a state of awed excitement, though garrulous as ever. The old man was still alive, he learnt, though they assured him, hopefully, that he could not last much longer.

Culver pushed his way through the gabbling women and climbed the steep stairs. At first glance he thought Jean was already dead. He lay on his bed, looking more like a mummy than ever, motionless, his tanned cheeks turned to a darker, unearthly hue. Culver spoke softly, hardly expecting to get any reply.

"Jean, it's Monsieur Culver. Jean, can you hear me?"

Slowly the old man's eyes opened and he motioned feebly for him to come nearer.

"Shut the door. Lock the door," he whispered with difficulty. "Keep them out, those women."

Culver obeyed and went back to the old man's bedside.

"You wanted to see me, Jean," he said in a low voice. "What is it? Can I do anything for you?"

Jean's speech came so slowly and in such a weak tone that Culver could scarcely understand him. He was patently uneasy, and it was pitiable to watch him groping in a gathering darkness for words that would not come.

The man seemed almost tortured as he tried to form a coherent phrase. He appeared to be appealing to Culver to help him as friend to friend.

Culver was aware of an intangible change in old Jean; it was as though some barrier between them had been broken down. He no longer thought of him as the rough, surly waiter.

"You want to tell me something?" he asked.

Jean nodded slowly.

"You—will—help——" he faltered with painful effort.

"Yes, Jean. Anything. Tell me."

"You—will—go—to—try——" He broke down, unable to sustain the effort, and presently his weak and shaking hand groped towards the grimy pillow.

"All right, old man. I understand," Culver murmured softly. "Don't worry." Tenderly he felt beneath the pillow and brought out a packet of papers loosely tied with twine. "This is what you mean—eh?"

"You—promise—me?"

The words were faint yet so eager. The sibilant French seemed to whisper in the air. Richard Culver was deeply moved. He did not know what he was to promise, though he answered distinctly: "All right. Trust me, Jean," all unconsciously speaking in English.

His words seemed to bring a sudden peace to the dying man. He seemed satisfied. The ghost of a smile flickered in the brown eyes, a smile of gratitude; and for some time he lay staring at the damp-stained ceiling.

And, as he watched, Culver saw that the tired face was softening. The deep lines grew less prominent, the sallow skin took upon it a finer look. Old Jean's mind was no longer in the shabby room; it had gone back to some distant past.

Culver knew he was watching death; death drawing its kindly fingers across Jean's rugged cheeks, and for a long time he sat there in silence, awed and feeling inexpressibly impotent.

Then, with a sudden, superhuman strength, the old man roused, and raised himself with a jerk, gazing far away into an immense distance, and the dry lips began to move.

The face was no longer that of old Jean of the Natation, but of a younger man, cleaner, less furtive. The brown eyes opened wide in wonder, and from those lips came clear, crisp words in the voice of a cultured, educated Englishman.

"Our Father——" it began. There was no hesitation, no slurring of syllables. Right to the end, old Jean repeated the Lord's Prayer, as Culver had heard it said hundreds of times in church. Then, just for a moment, he did hesitate, and his head drooped slowly towards his breast, and his last words came in a quieter, subdued voice.

"Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom," he said distinctly. The wondering brown eyes closed slowly, and with a deep sigh old Jean of the Natation died.

V

Richard Culver was neither shocked nor afraid. He found himself feeling glad, glad that old Jean had left, at last, a world that must only have held sorrow for him.

He felt, too, that he had witnessed the fall of the curtain upon a tragedy. Old Jean, the queer old fellow who had gone out with the words of the Penitent Thief upon his lips, was no German or Frenchman, but English, English as Culver himself. And educated, too; there was the accent of the Public Schools in his last speech, a peculiar quality of voice that belonged to no uncultured man.

He looked at the still figure on the bed, so peaceful and quiet now.

"Good-bye, Jean," he said, covering the softened face reverently. He remembered suddenly the papers he held, still clutched in his hand.

For the moment he was sorry they were there.

Sensitive as he was, he felt he did not want to pry further into the secret of this man's past. Yet he had promised something. What, he did not know. But, he realised, quickly, it would be far better for him to deal with Jean's papers than for a soulless officialdom. If this were the end of some great scandal, some family tragedy, then Richard Culver would use his own discretion as to how much or how little he told the world.

He crammed the packet into his pocket and instinctively began to search the room. But the search produced nothing. A tottery chest of drawers held Jean's meagre wardrobe: the battered canvas-covered port-manteau, with its broken lock and frayed corners, held only his shabby dress-suit.

Culver went out of the, now so quiet, room with a new sense of responsibility.

By the door, Madelaine was still chattering excitedly with the other women. As Culver appeared she stretched out a powerful arm scornfully, and pointed to a peasant girl who hovered uncertainly on the outskirts of the crowd.

"There she is; look at her; the young lady who is afraid," she taunted. "A dutiful niece indeed! Why don't you come and thank the English gentleman? Too fond of your money, yes? Afraid you would have to pay your uncle's debts?" She finished with a vile epithet.

Culver stood amazed for the moment, his eyes fixed upon the cowering girl. She gave him only a momentary glance, but there was fear as well as anger in the startled eyes. Indeed, she looked innocent enough for all that Madelaine said of her; a scared woman, and undeniably attractive in her peasant garb.

Richard Culver strove to check Madelaine's storm of abuse.

"What is it? What is it?" he asked impatiently.

Madelaine began a torrential explanation, and when Culver glanced up again, the girl had gone.

"Marie Schmidt, the worthless one! Jean's niece, she says she is," the woman sneered. "Jean asked for her; I sent the telegram. But she was afraid to come in, afraid because she heard you were there; afraid because she thinks you would make her pay some of the money Jean owes. Jean's niece—huh!"

"Be quiet, Madelaine! Be quiet!" Culver interrupted, able only to understand a few words of the woman's speech. "It does not matter. Poor Jean is dead."

Madelaine ceased her tirade.

"Poor fellow," she murmured in affected grief. She crossed herself.

Culver went on.

"Madelaine, attend to me." He spoke slowly in his halting French. "You are to see about the funeral, a—a—worthy——" he could think of no other word—"funeral. I will pay everything, and you for your pains."

Money spoke to Madelaine as it always did. Instantly she was attentive and acquiescent. Everything, she said, should be done; everything.

"And," Culver said as he turned to leave, "if Marie Schmidt comes again, send her round to me, at the Grande Hotel."

He hurried off, anxious to get away from the vituperation and sordidness of the place where poor old Jean lay dead. That half-comprehended incident of Marie Schmidt fretted him. Two fish-wives screaming at one another as it seemed to him, though Marie had not uttered a word, struck him as a deplorable anti-climax to the tragedy.

Forgetful of hunger, he wandered on past the hotel, out into the waste of sand dunes beyond the Plage.

They looked lonely, and detached, and Dick Culver wanted to be alone just then.

He found a resting place, high up on top of a rush-covered dune, with the grey-green sea of sandhills behind him and the grey-green sea idly lapping in below, and great white-winged gulls riding easily in the sky above his head. And there, in solitude, he went through old Jean's papers.

They told little enough. There were the identification papers and a passport of Jean Jacques Malet, born in Antwerp in 1867, a few francs in Belgian notes. A creased and worn front page of *The Times* of twenty years ago, a railway map of Belgium, and a letter, newly written in a shaky hand, yet so clearly that of the real Jean, the neat, small, well-formed script with its Greek "e's" of the educated Englishman.

The letter was already addressed: "William Cook, Esqre., The Pines, Oldford, Suffolk, Angleterre."

That was the only hint Jean's papers gave of the mystery of his life.

For a long time Dick Culver sat staring out across the gently heaving sea. Seventy or eighty miles over there was Suffolk. And William Cook, whoever he might be. Perhaps an old and broken man, to whom the news of Jean's death might come as a shock—or as a relief.

Away to the left, St. Gules was waking to life under the warm morning sun. Gay parasols dotted the sands, and a trim yawl was nosing her way between the harbour piers.

Dick Culver returned by a roundabout route. He had to redeem his unspoken promise to a dead countryman. How he should redeem it he did not quite know, but he was going to Oldford to see William Cook, and what he told when he saw him should depend on—William Cook.

CHAPTER II

I

THEY buried Jean Jacques Malet in the dreary little cemetery at the back of St. Gules on a blazing hot morning, and only Richard Culver and Madelaine followed him to his grave.

That same evening found Culver at Antwerp; early the next morning at Harwich. He did not hurry. Indeed, now that he was drawing near the end of his journey, he felt a growing distaste for the task he had undertaken.

It was not a pleasant job to look forward to. He would have to be tactful; lie if necessary. Old sores reopened and old scandals revived were apt to hurt all the more because they had been put out of mind for many years. And there must have been one of the most poignant of tragedies behind old Jean's life.

Culver delayed long over breakfast at Harwich, and hired a car to drive him to Oldford. For once the rich beauty of the August landscape made no appeal to him. The yellow harvest fields, all shimmering in the sun, the wide sweep of purple heather on the Suffolk commons; the golden glory of the gorse, he hardly saw, for his mind was back in that squalid attic chamber in the fishing town of St. Gules, and old Jean's last distinct words were ringing in his ears.

And then he came to Oldford, past the crowded golf-links, down the steep hill, with the same, grey-green sea glistening in the distance, to the Palace Hotel with its throng of white-clad, laughing holiday-makers drinking their before-lunch cocktails and chattering of games and pleasures, and life. Richard

Culver felt like some avenging fate as he elbowed his way to the office to demand a room.

II

Oldford is a queer place. The old town sprawls itself along a mile of shingly coast with the modern town rising sharply from the beach, a haphazard collection of villas and little terraces of lodging-houses, with the flint tower of the ancient church crowning all.

In times past Oldford was a busy port, doing a brisk trade with the Low Countries; but that is all over now, and Oldford thrives on its summer visitors and its famous golf-links.

For nine months of the year the place is as dead as its own, silted-up harbour which shows silent mud flats to the sky for sixteen hours out of each twenty-four. But in the holiday season Oldford wakes to life, like its harbour at high water when it dances and sparkles in the sunshine.

And Oldford seemed very much alive that August afternoon as Richard Culver made his way thoughtfully along its main street, filled with flannel-clad youths and white-frocked girls. The hot sun shone from a cloudless sky, and down each narrow lane which led to the beach there was a vista of yellow shingle backed by a dancing sea, with here and there a sail, or a smudge of smoke on the horizon from some steamer far out.

"The Pines," they had told him, "was down by the river," which he came to understand was the local description of the harbour. "Keep the lane round by the marshes and you can't miss it," the hotel-porter explained.

Culver found it easily enough. It stood alone, a prosperous, peaceful-looking place, just the sort of

home to which conventional, well-to-do gentlefolk would retire, and utterly unlike anything connected with Jean of the Natation.

Culver stood hesitating just inside the neat, white-painted gate. From beyond a tall hedge of laurels, which skirted the gravelled drive, there came the sound of laughter and the thud of a hard-hit tennis ball. He could see a flicker of white through the gaps in the evergreens, and somebody called in jesting reproof: "Really, Elsa! you might have taken that one."

Culver turned to go. He could not break in upon this pleasant scene with his grim story of family disgrace. He halted, frowning down at the gravel, prodding little holes in it with his stick. Then a girl's voice at his elbow caused him to look up, almost with a guilty start.

"You looking for anybody?" she asked in a lazy drawl.

He found himself staring into a pair of big, questioning, hazel eyes which seemed to be appraising him part in interest, part in amusement. And under that steady gaze he grew inexplicably embarrassed.

"I—er—I wanted to see Mr. Cook—Mr. William Cook," he began nervously.

"Yes?" She waited, as if she expected him to say more. "You're a pal of Bill's, I suppose?"

"No. Oh no." He looked at her stupidly. She had appeared so silently and unexpectedly from the gate that he had not yet recovered from his surprise.

She was hatless, and her shingled, brown hair fell carelessly over her forehead in a provocative way. Her clear skin was burnt by the sun, and under one shapely, tanned arm, which made her tennis frock look the whiter, she carried a couple of rackets.

She seemed to sense his embarrassment.

"Well, come along in," she said, with a slow smile. "Or—or—do you want to see Bill on business?"

"I do rather—that is, perhaps I'd better not interrupt him now. I'll look round later on—when he's not busy."

"Oh, don't do that. Bill's never busy, really. I'll tell him. Who shall I say?"

"Culver. But—but Mr. Cook won't know me. I say—really, I'd better leave it."

"I shouldn't." There was a glint of laughter in the hazel eyes; a suggestion that this graceful, sunburned girl was enjoying some secret joke. It fretted Culver, conscious as he was of the gravity of his mission.

"Thanks; but I think I will," he answered stiffly. She smiled; frankly now.

"Just as you like," she said, seeming to mock him. "But here is Bill—if you want to see—him."

Culver swung round sharply.

A tall, spare woman, past her first youth, yet undeniably attractive, had just emerged from a path in the shrubbery. She was smoking a cigarette in a long amber holder, and she was looking in question at Culver and the girl by his side.

"Hallo, Bill," the girl called gaily. "Here's a visitor inquiring for you."

Dick Culver felt almost that he was blushing in his confusion.

"It was a Mr. William Cook that I wanted," he said shortly, raising his hat.

The elder woman smiled mechanically as she flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"Yes," she answered in a deep, quiet voice. "I am William Cook—at least, that is my trade name."

"Really? Of course. Oh yes."

Culver found himself floundering idiotically, the

more so because he was conscious of the hardly hidden smile of amusement at his embarrassment on the red lips of that taunting girl.

The elder woman raised her deftly pencilled eyebrows as though she were at a loss to understand her visitor's behaviour.

"Perhaps I'd better explain," she said. "William Cook is an adaptation of my late husband's name. I am Mrs. Wilfred Coke—we pronounce it Cook, you know." She gave an easy little smile. "And you?"

"Culver—Richard Culver," he answered quickly, feeling a little more at ease now. But he wished the girl would go. He could not explain his call with her standing there laughing at him. Involuntarily his eyes went towards her, and Mrs. Coke seemed to read his meaning.

"Ann, dear, go and tell them that I shan't be long, will you?" she said in the most natural way; then to Culver: "Won't you come into the house? It's rather silly to stand talking here, isn't it?"

III

He was struck by her manner, the competent way in which she controlled a rather foolish situation.

"Thanks, if I may," he answered, enormously relieved to see the girl, addressed as Ann, disappearing in the shrubbery. "I have come on rather a sad mission, I'm afraid. If you'd prefer it, I'll come back later."

She glanced at him sharply through penetrating eyes of a steely blue tint: queer eyes, he thought, they seemed to veil a great secret, and shook her head. It struck him then that already she suspected something of the import of his visit. And it flashed into his mind, too, that her name was familiar. Mrs. Wilfred Coke—he remembered now.

"Was your husband the etcher?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. Did you know him?" There was a suggestion of apprehension in the sharp way in which she asked the question.

"No. Oh no. Only his work. I know and admire that tremendously."

She sighed. "Yes, it's fine work," she agreed.

Little forgotten details were returning vividly to Culver's mind as he walked the last few paces to the house; odd scraps of stories he had heard from artist friends of Wilfred Coke and his end. A brilliant artist unhappily married, they had said of him. And he had taken to drink, soaked until his hand failed him. Then he had had an accident—at least, that was how a generous coroner had described it—gone overboard from a sailing-boat on a winter afternoon some years ago. But those who knew him did not agree with the coroner's verdict.

No wonder this woman had looked startled when she asked if Culver had known her husband, he thought. She must have had a devil of a life. And this fellow Jean mixed up in it, too!

He looked at her as they went up the steps, a hard-bitten woman with a dry, hard skin skilfully powdered to disguise the effects of age and weather, like that of a hunting woman or a champion golfer. But her hair showed no trace of grey. Severely shingled, it was black and thick as a youth's. Her forehead was puckered, and she was evidently thinking hard. He left her to make the next move.

"You said a sad mission, Mr. Culver?" she queried at last. "What is it?"

She faced him bravely; he could almost see her bracing herself for the shock.

"It is rather sad," he answered. They turned into

a vast room looking out across the river, a studio with canvases littered about, and at one end a motley collection of old furniture. "I've just come back from St. Gules——" Her eyes lifted quickly. "Did you know old Jean there—Jean of the Natation?"

She hesitated a fraction of a second before she answered:

"Yes. Yes. Everybody knows him. A funny old fellow. So surly—but rather a dear."

"He's dead," Culver blurted out.

"Really! Poor old Jean!"

There was no trace of distress in her voice. She spoke rather as one speaks of a dead terrier. That nettled Culver; unreasonably he knew, but he had been so much obsessed by the tragedy of Jean that this indifferent reception of his news hurt him.

"I was with him when he died," he went on deliberately, "and I have a letter from him—I assume it's from him—for William Cook."

Then she did show some trace of feeling. Again it seemed she braced herself for a shock. She put out her hand. "Poor old Jean," she repeated. "I'm so sorry. Somehow—one never thought of Jean dying."

She laughed a nervous, mirthless laugh, crumpling the letter in her hand and gazing uncertainly at the floor.

"If you're not in a dreadful hurry, Mr. Culver," she said, after a moment, "I wish you would forgive me while I go and settle my party. I'll be back in a few minutes. I want you to tell me all about poor Jean. You were fond of him—I can see that." She gave him a quiet smile of understanding. "You will wait, won't you?"

And without heeding his answer, she hurried away.

IV

Of course, it was a ruse : the baldest ruse to make an opportunity to read the letter alone. Culver understood that, and appreciated it. But there were many things he could not understand, chief among them what connection there could be between Jean and Mrs. Coke.

She was too old to be his daughter, almost too young to be his sister, and wife was ruled out of the question.

She had been anxious, and she had been dissembling—that, too, was clear—but there was a note in her last words that made him feel that she had some affection for the dead man. He felt curious, anxious now to learn more. If he were satisfied that she had a right to know, he would tell her of the pathetic details of Jean's last moments—it might comfort her as it so clearly had comforted him.

Culver wandered aimlessly about the big studio. There was something very masculine about it. Tobacco-ash was sprinkled about the floor, and on a rickety, old, oak table, by the far wall, was a decanter of whisky with a syphon by its side.

The pictures were mostly seascapes, or vivid little sketches of the purple commons, but there were a few old canvases on the walls, a Dutch still life, and a charming little sea piece that might have been a Van de Velde, though it was in such grimy condition one could hardly see it.

But the jumble of furniture at the far end interested him most; piled up anyhow, was an extraordinary collection of maimed and broken stuff. All of it good. Culver had an eye for old furniture; there was not a fake in the lot so far as he could see. Standing in

front of this pathetic medley of ill-used treasures, was an unusually fine dower chest : Flemish he placed it, a huge thing of massive timbers a couple of inches thick, bound round with iron in a glorious design. But the chest had been most shamefully treated. One end had been smashed and was crudely repaired with a common deal board, and the whole thing had been painted a dull bilious yellow, stained with dirt and age.

He went across to examine it more closely. Mrs. Coke or somebody was treating the woodwork. From the lid much of the paint had already been removed, and the rest was covered with a sticky substance with a view to removing the remainder. In a moment he visualised the chest as it would be, properly restored—a wonderful specimen, fit for a museum.

Something caused him to look up suddenly, and once more he met those questioning, hazel eyes of the girl Ann. But there was no mockery in them now, they looked unnaturally serious.

She was standing outside the open window gazing at him. She smiled in a friendly way.

"I say, Mr. Culver," she began. "I'm awfully sorry; I really didn't mean to rag you about Bill."

"Oh, that's all right," he answered a little stiltedly. "I—I didn't take it as ragging——"

"I thought at first you were trying to pull my leg," she drawled. "I'd have sworn you were Captain Mingay, Elsa's pal. You're the living image of him, you know."

"Elsa? Who's Elsa?" he asked, bewildered.

"Elsa Mayer. Oh, but of course you wouldn't know. Anyhow, I'm sorry." She smiled again in a way that hardly carried conviction of penitence, and swung herself in through the window. "But I really came up to get some gaspers," she went on, "and for

the Lord's sake don't tell Bill; she hates me messing about in her cupboards."

Promptly the girl began to ransack an oak corner cupboard. Culver saw that it was filled with brushes and bottles and the paraphernalia of a painter. Ann seemed to have forgotten him for the moment.

"Now, where the devil——" she murmured to herself, groping among a row of tins. Then: "Ah! here they are."

She extracted a handful of cigarettes and turned to him with a shamed little chuckle.

"Better have one," she said frankly. "Be an accessory."

Instinctively he took one. Not that he wanted it, but this girl unsettled him. She was so inconsequent; she made him feel old and staid and stodgy. He was a little afraid of her.

She looked round for a match, and hurriedly he pulled a box from his pocket.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll have to hop back now. You're coming along later, I suppose?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, do. Bill's got a most dreadful bunch here. She may know all about mouldy furniture, but she collects mouldier people. Do come down; you'll be the only bright spot."

Her flattering frankness made him laugh naturally for the first time. She was so entirely devoid of self-consciousness; she treated him as if she had known him all her life.

"I haven't been asked yet," he said.

"But I've asked you." She looked up at him as if she were really surprised.

"And I don't even know your name."

"Ann."

"Yes, but——"

"Gray. Ann Gray. But I'm Ann to everybody here, just as she's Bill. We don't bother about surnames. Gosh! here she is!" For the moment she was surprised out of her usual lazy drawl. "Don't you give me away now," she whispered as she swung out of the window.

He shook his head and turned to the opening door. Mrs. Coke came in.

"I'm dreadfully sorry to be so long," she said, with a compelling smile. "You're smoking. I'm glad of that, but won't you have a whisky-and-soda? You see, I know what you men like."

It struck him then that there was a bitterness in her voice born of years of experience with the dead Wilfred Coke.

"No, thanks very much," he answered.

"Then sit down. I've arranged my people for a time. Tell me about Jean, now. He wasn't terribly hard up or anything like that—poor old dear?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I ask because of his letter," she went on with a ring of sympathy. "You might as well see it; I need make no secret of it to you, I know. He wrote this."

She put forward a crumpled sheet of paper, thin and almost transparent. Culver glanced at it, and felt himself start in surprise. The letter was not in that neat, educated handwriting of the address, but in sprawling, ill-formed script, and in French, and illiterate French at that. Jean had never written this.

CHAPTER III

I

THE letter was an obvious fake; that was Dick Culver's immediate impression as he scanned the ill-traced words.

"Poor Jean, he was not a great correspondent, I'm afraid," Mrs. Coke went on with a little shake of the head. "These old Flemish peasants can seldom write even."

"I suppose not," he answered mechanically, his eyes still fixed upon the scrawl.

He found it hard to understand. There was something about a chest, and a servile appeal for money. Suddenly Culver felt sore and angry. To be expected to believe that Jean had written this trivial stuff wounded his pride.

What a fool he had made of himself, dashing across to England with a fanciful idea of breaking tragic news, gently; of helping to soften a blow to some proud family, only to be met by this contemptuous recognition.

"So that was it?" he said, pointlessly, returning the letter.

Mrs. Coke was eyeing him gravely. He met her gaze with hostility. Why should she try to deceive him like this—if she were trying to?

"I must explain the whole thing to you," she began calmly, "because it was awfully—sweet—of you to take so much trouble. Believe me, I do appreciate it."

"It's nothing. I had no means of telling how important it might be."

"Of course not. That's why I want to explain." She gave a queer, nervous laugh. "You see, Mr. Culver, I am a dealer," she said defiantly. "This I call my hospital." She flung out an arm with a graceful gesture towards the heap of old furniture at the far end.

"Indeed."

"I found it paid better than painting, after my husband died." Her eyes strayed from his face as if she were recalling unwelcome memories. "I had to do something to live. Unfortunately one will cling to life"—she shrugged her shoulders in a cynical way—"and I learned, when I had to sell most of our own furniture, that there was money in the game, if you have any knowledge at all. And so—well, that's my story."

She was recapturing his interest. He felt sorry for her, despite himself.

"Very clever and plucky of you, Mrs. Coke," he said.

"You really think so? I'm so glad." She had shed her mood of sadness momentarily and was all smiles.

"I began in quite an amateur way, you know—in London, selling to my friends mostly. But I hate London—don't you? Down here it will be different. I'm going in for things on a different scale. The really good things, like that wonderful dower chest."

"I was looking at it," he broke in. "What a fine thing it is!"

"Oh! So you appreciate nice things too?"

"I love old furniture."

"Well, that's one of my real bargains. That cost me ten pounds—delivered to this house, and I'm going to restore it myself—I'm rather clever at that—and then I think I'm pretty certain of a purchaser in

America. But why I tell you this, Mr. Culver, is that Jean got that for me."

"Did he?" Culver was genuinely surprised.

"Yes. It was in a stable near St. Gules. They used it for keeping corn in. I saw it when I was over there in June, and I got Jean to buy it for me. We dealers, you know, have to be cunning if we are to make our profit," she added apologetically.

"So that's how old Jean comes into the story?" he said, almost thinking aloud. He was still subconsciously trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

"So my mission wasn't a very sad one, after all."

"Oh, but it was." The strange eyes had clouded. "I really was awfully fond of the old man; I'd known him for years at the café. And he was so quaint, after he bought that chest; it seemed to fire his imagination. He kept finding new treasures for me to buy, most of them utterly useless. But you can see how valuable a man like that was to me."

"Of course. And I expect you were valuable to him."

"He didn't lose by it—as you see from his letter. The dear old thing was just as fond of money as most of us—the Flemings a little bit more, I think, don't you?"

Memories of Madelaine's cupidity came back to him, and he agreed.

"And so you were with him when he died," Mrs. Coke went on. "That was very decent of you. I suppose he was alone; no relations came near him?"

Culver told the story of the niece.

"How like those people! So hard!" the woman commented. "But how was it he came to ask you to bring this letter?" The question seemed to slip out as a mere politeness.

Culver thought for a moment. He was very un-

certain. Somehow this story was not altogether convincing, and he still doubted that letter, although his doubts were a little shaken.

She was trying to get at something. But what? Was she really a relative, testing him to make sure that the secret had not been disclosed? He might have done much the same thing in the circumstances—given nothing away, even lied to hush up a scandal. Or was her story true?

Anyhow, it seemed to him that Jean's secret were better untold now.

"It was with a few of his papers, and as I was coming back I thought I'd better deliver it," he answered at length. "He evidently wanted me to do something with it, and this was the obvious thing," he went on glibly.

He looked up at her. Her face was like a mask, but it impressed him that she did not believe him.

"How really nice of you!" she said in a low voice, full of appreciation. "But I do feel so guilty, having brought you on such a long journey. You will stay to tea, won't you? Come down to the lawn; you'll find some quite amusing people there. I feel I want to know more of you, Mr. Culver; this is—in a way—such a romantic meeting."

But Culver would not be persuaded. The whole incident somehow fretted him. It had turned from tragedy into bathos. He felt flat and puerile, and anxious to get away, alone, to reason with himself.

"Some other time—if I may," he said with a conventional smile as he rose to leave.

Mrs. Coke did not press her invitation.

"Please do. Any time," she replied, extending a graceful arm. "I shall never forget how nice you were about this."

II

A couple of miles along that lonely shingle beach that runs southward from Oldford towards the mouth of Walm Harbour, Dick Culver scooped himself a seat in the pebbles and tried to persuade himself that Mrs. Coke's story was true.

If Jean Malet had meant anything to her, she could not have behaved as she had done, he told himself. She had been a little ill at ease, of course—the circumstances of his call accounted for that—but her straightforward explanation held water.

And yet—— There was always an "and yet" arising in his mind to oppose every one of his reasons.

The letter! That took a lot of believing. The difference in the handwriting alone condemned it. And yet—— She would have realised that. She need never have showed him the letter at all.

He worried and fretted at the problem until the sun began to sink behind him, and his lengthening shadow told that evening was drawing on. A little breeze blew in from the sea, chill after the heat of the day, and a pale moon came up mysteriously out of the quiet water that lapped in tiny, restless, singing waves against the shingle shore, in defiance, as it seemed, of the declining sun.

Frowning, he stared out across the grey water. Was it any business of his, anyhow? he asked himself. He picked up a stone and threw it viciously at a patch of floating seaweed. If Mrs. Coke had a secret to keep, why shouldn't she keep it?

And then the queer, transfigured face of old Jean came back to him; Jean in his last moments of life. What had he wanted? What was that promise which Culver had given so readily and which had brought

the last peace to the dying man? That unsettled him in a way. After all, he couldn't do any more than he had done. Let the dead bury its dead.

"Oh, damn the whole business!" he said, getting, abruptly, to his feet. He was cold, and disappointed. That was the truth of the matter, he admitted, frankly. He had looked for some dramatic scene and it had not come off.

He tramped the weary miles back to the hotel in the same disgruntled mood. He would clear off the next morning, he decided; go back to St. Gules, pick up his luggage, and wander south. Get away from the atmosphere of Jean and Mrs. Coke, and romantic surmise. Forget it.

Dinner was over when he reached the Palace. Culver ate a half-cold meal in a corner of the big dining-room and chafed and fretted at the babble of careless talk and laughter which flooded to his ears from the crowded lounge. There was a dance at the hotel that night; already the band had started. And the insistent throbbing rhythm of the music, which on any other night would have set his feet itching to dance, merely served to aggravate his irritable mood.

He was out of conceit with himself—out of conceit with the world. He felt he hated the few late-comers like himself, who were scattered about the room—a faded-looking mother with a couple of noisy, self-conscious flappers who cackled and giggled, a portly, sunburned man in loud tweeds who talked golf to his bored companion, and a round-faced, amiable, elderly parson in dark grey flannels at a neighbouring table, who tried to be friendly, and whom Culver snubbed deliberately and then felt ashamed of his rudeness.

They all irked him. He left his meal half finished, forced an apologetic "Good-evening" to the parson

as he went out, and hurried to his room, cursing the throbbing dance tunes that penetrated even there.

Before a window, wide open to the still, moon-lit night, Dick Culver went through old Jean's papers once more. He had a foolish idea of putting them all into an envelope and posting them to Mrs. Coke with a brief note of explanation. Then he decided to destroy them.

He scanned them curiously one by one, these tiny fragments of flotsam, all that remained of the tragic wreck of a human life. The passport—with its crude photograph of Jean—that faded and creased sheet of newspaper from a *Times* of twenty years ago. Why had Jean kept that? Culver shrugged his shoulders. If he knew the answer to that question he would probably know much of the hidden tragedy.

His eyes ran down the page mechanically, and riveted to one announcement that seemed now to jump out from the long column of marriage notices.

"Coke—Garland," it read. "On the 15th inst. at St. Chad's Church, Chelsea, Wilfred Hansard Coke, elder son of the late Captain Alban Hansard Coke, R.N., of Cheltenham, to Maude Wilhelmina Garland."

"Wilhelmina Garland. Wilhelmina Coke. Bill." He spoke the words aloud. There could be no doubt about it—this the woman. So she had lied to him!

Here was a definite connection, twenty years old, between Jean of the Natation and the woman who called herself William Cook. And she had pretended, so convincingly, that Jean meant nothing more to her than a Flemish peasant, whom she had employed to buy an old chest.

For a few moments Culver was furiously angry. His instinct was to go straight off, then and there, to The Pines and face Mrs. Coke; let her know, at

any rate, that he knew she had been lying. But his anger changed to hard resentment.

If this woman thought she could fool him so easily, she should find out that she was wrong. He had a promise to redeem to old Jean and he would redeem it. But first of all he must have a few more facts at his disposal; facts which would refute any further attempt at duplicity on Mrs. Coke's part.

He would go to her, later; when he had found out a little more about her. There was something for him to work on now. Garland—her maiden name. Who were the Garlands? Had Jean's name perchance been Garland?

Then came the memory of that peasant girl, Marie Schmidt, his niece. Perhaps the old man had married a peasant—for who could say what reason?—and gone native, as they put it in the East. Marie Schmidt ought to be traceable. There should be clues to pick up from her. Yes, that is what he would do first, go back to St. Gules as he intended, but not wander south. He would find Marie Schmidt if possible, and see where she led him.

Carefully Culver folded up the worn papers, and locked them away in his bag. His fretful, dark mood of dinner-time had gone. He was grave, but alert. There was a task ahead of him which appealed to his imagination. And two debts to be paid—one to Jean's memory and the other to "Bill" Coke.

The troubling rhythm of the dance music no longer irritated; it sounded rather jolly. Culver went to the door. He would go and watch the dancers for a bit, and have a drink, and think things out downstairs.

III

Making his way through the crowded, noisy lounge, Dick Culver suddenly caught sight of Ann Gray.

She saw him at the same moment, and smiled in recognition. He would have passed on, but she disengaged herself from a group of laughing companions and called to him.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she asked in her lazy voice.

He stopped. "I don't know. I'm not changed, for one thing," he answered, looking at her curiously. She was really very attractive, so cool and unperurbed in the midst of this noisy, heated crowd, her brown hair just a little ruffled, her tanned cheeks so fresh and healthy. He liked her frock, too, a simple thing of some blue material that looked to his masculine eye, just right. This girl knew how to dress, he told himself.

"Well, go and change," she said frankly. She looked up at him with grave mockery. "Richard Culver's got the hump to-night, hasn't he?" she demanded provocatively.

She made him feel self-conscious. She was laughing at him again. But he tried to answer her in her own light way.

"Not particularly," he said. "Why does Ann make that serious allegation?"

"Just because——" she answered. She was edging him through the crowd towards the open doors which led to the verandah facing the sea. "Why didn't you come to Bill's party this afternoon?" she went on.

He frowned involuntarily. "I couldn't very well," he said, with a touch of confusion. "I—I had to see Mrs. Coke on—on business, and——"

"But Bill said she asked you, and you were stuffy about it, and wouldn't come. And I asked you."

He was fretting under this catechism.

"I know you did. But I—I had things to do. I'm only here for a few hours. I have to get away to-morrow."

"Where are you going?" she asked innocently.

"Back to St. Gules."

"What a rotten spot! I'd much rather be here."

They had wandered out through the garden to the edge of the beach, and he was gazing at the sea, all silvery in the moonlight, wondering why on earth this girl should take so much interest in him. Was there a motive behind it?

"You're an old friend of Mrs. Coke's, I suppose," he asked with sudden irrelevance.

"Bill? Not very. I met her in Town, and when I found her down here I fell upon her with a shriek. She's enormous fun."

"I thought you were staying with her," he said.

"Oh, Lord, no! I'm staying here. And a very good place, too, Richard Culver."

"I'm beginning to think it is," he laughed. "Still, I've got to go away."

A boisterous crowd of young people burst from the door of the hotel, and somebody called: "Ann. Ann, you out here?"

"All right, I'm coming," the girl called back.

"You're wanted on the telephone."

"Well, go and tell them to hang on," she answered carelessly. Then: "Good-bye, Richard Culver, don't be too dismal," she laughed, and she left him.

CHAPTER IV

I

DICK CULVER was back in St. Gules the next night. He went up to Town and crossed by the afternoon boat to Ostend. He could not, he felt, hang about Oldford for the whole of the day, with a chance of meeting Mrs. Coke, or Ann Gray, even.

For that odd little interview with Ann had disquieted him. He had come to feel that she was playing a part on Mrs. Coke's behalf; trying to get something out of him to tell her; some hint of his suspicions. Culver rather hated the thought. Ann seemed much too clean and honest a girl to be playing an underhand game.

It was late when he reached the Grande, on the Plage, but the hotel was full of life, so like yet so unlike, he thought, that other hotel eighty odd miles across the sea. The same moon was streaming down on the silvery water, the same rhythmic tunes being played by the dance band. But the people were different, the atmosphere was different. The gaiety of St. Gules was a professional gaiety, not spontaneous and jolly as it had been at Oldford. The dancing women were hard-eyed and daring, the men cynical in their less boisterous laughter. For the first time he agreed with Ann's candid remark—St. Gules did seem a rotten hole.

Culver avoided Phil Norman and his party, who were sitting on the *terrasse* sipping drinks between dances. He did not want to have to answer questions, or to be gay. Norman was a good chap, but not the

sort of man to understand why one should go dashing off to England just because a dying waiter asked you to deliver a letter. But he might know something about Wilfred Coke's antecedents though. Culver would tackle him, tactfully, to-morrow.

He went along to the harbour soon after breakfast. Madelaine was, as usual, engaged in voluble gossip with her neighbours. She looked surprised to see Culver, and came to meet him, still talking over her shoulder to her companions.

Culver began guilefully. He knew the suspicious type of mind with which he had to deal. He suggested that he had merely come to see that everything was properly settled, and that he had paid all he owed.

Madelaine's greedy eyes narrowed, and she invited him indoors—for fear that their conversation might be overheard by her already curious neighbours. And promptly she invented an outstanding loan of ten francs, which she said she had made to Jean. Culver nodded acquiescence.

"And that telegram you sent for him?" he queried casually.

"But, yes. That is so. I had forgotten that, too," the woman answered quickly.

Culver played with a couple of twenty-five franc notes, and observed with satisfaction the woman's avaricious gaze constantly shifting to them.

"Marie Schmidt never came again, I suppose?" he asked in his laboured French.

"No. No. Not she. The worthless one!" Madelaine became indignant. "She only come to see if there was any money to get. That's all."

Culver abandoned Marie Schmidt for the moment.

"Old Jean, he had lived here a long time with you, Madelaine?" he asked.

"Some months. Perhaps two, perhaps three. He

did not stay long anywhere. Such a terrible man! Oh!" She shivered with exaggerated horror.

"Why was that? Didn't pay his bills?" Culver asked.

"It was not that. It was the drink. Sometimes for hours he would sit in his room drinking cognac. And he would not be happy, or quarrelsome like the rest when they drink, but just dumb. And if I go in he would stare at me so terribly. As if he would kill me. And never speak. Just glare. Oh, but he must have been a bad man, that Jean. It was the same everywhere he lived, he frightened them. They turned him out. I would have turned him out, but he was ill, and I am a charitable woman."

"Yes, yes. You have a kind heart, Madelaine," Culver said with a smile. "But he is gone now, poor Jean, so we must forget that he was bad."

"Certainly, m'sieur. Poor old man!" She crossed herself mechanically.

He encouraged her to talk more of Jean. She had known him for many years, she said. And he had aged much in that time. "It was his wicked life," she announced fiercely, but details of that wicked life Culver would not extract. It was obviously mere gossip, the gossip of a people who mistrusted and hated the foreigner.

And so Culver led slowly back to Marie Schmidt.

"I think I should like her to know that her uncle was buried properly," he said, "and that you looked after him to the end. I'll write to her, Madelaine, if you'll tell me the address."

The woman looked up suspiciously, then down once more at those crisp notes with which Culver toyed.

"If I can find it," she said evasively.

Culver looked meaningly at the money.

"You can find it if you try, Madelaine," he said confidently.

She ceased to fence. From a dingy cupboard she extracted a grimy piece of paper, treasured for some furtive purpose of her own. Culver took it from her. Roughly scrawled on a sheet of the cheapest paper were the words: "Marie Schmidt, Rue Jan Hoeck 47, Antwerp."

"Thank you, Madelaine," he said. "You will have no more need for this. Here's fifty francs to pay for everything."

The woman grabbed the money, smiling. Jean Malet had proved an uncommonly good bargain for her.

II

The Rue Jan Hoeck at Antwerp is by the docks; a narrow, squalid street of ramshackle, tenement houses interspersed with gaping spaces where the rottenest of the shabby buildings have either been pulled down or have fallen of their own decay.

In the empty spaces, the teeming child population of the slum plays drearily all day, and drab outcasts of the city find refuge by night.

A gloomy, repulsive street, the Rue Jan Hoeck; and Dick Culver felt its repulsion as he turned into it in the heat of that August afternoon. The place was stifling. Even the lean cats of the street had sought the shade, and hardly a person was moving along the uneven *pavé*.

Under a tattered awning in front of the dingy estaminet at the corner, a few rough-looking sailormen and dock labourers sat over their tepid beer, their shirts flung open at the chest, and the sweat standing in beads on their grimy faces.

Culver made his way slowly along the steaming,

reeking lane. Number 47 was halfway down. He stopped before he reached it, and scanned its uninviting door with curious interest.

On a rough bench were displayed odds and ends of old metal, and a coil or two of rope. Some hard-worn oilskins hung limply in a spiritless mass from a knob by the door. Number 47 was obviously a marine store dealer's, and a very poor one at that.

Culver knocked on the open door; he was unwilling to enter so dirty a hovel.

For some moments no answer came to his summons and he ventured in. The place gave out the sour, musty smell of rotting rags and decaying rubbish, through which the clean scent of Stockholm tar penetrated like some refreshing breeze. He knocked again, this time on the crazy floor with his stick, and a moment or two later a door opened at the back, and a dour, beady-eyed, black-haired slattern appeared, eyeing the stranger with open mistrust, and gabbling in Flemish.

Culver tried his French, but the woman merely gaped at him before breaking once more into her stream of unintelligible words.

"Marie Schmidt. I wish to speak to Marie Schmidt," Culver said deliberately.

The woman retreated a pace or two, and called out in a sharp voice to somebody in the room beyond. What she said, Culver had not the least idea, but her words brought a sullen-looking man into the shop, a tall, powerful fellow who seemed just to have been awakened from sleep.

His first glance at Culver, under frowning, bushy eyebrows, was furtive and suspicious. Then his face became blank and oafish.

"Marie Schmidt," Culver repeated. "She lives here. I wish to see her."

The man shook his head.

"I am sure she does," Culver went on, growing annoyed with the stupidity of these people. "I come from her uncle, Jean Malet of St. Gules."

That name brought expression to the wooden faces. Instantly they glanced at one another, then with a look of question back at Culver.

"Jean Malet?" the man queried in an odd tone. "Entrez." He nodded jerkily towards the inner room, then turned to the woman and said something in a low voice, which Culver could not understand. The woman answered in the same unintelligible way, and sat down on a stool by the door, and the man led the way into the back room.

It was sparsely furnished, and cleaner than Culver had expected. An open bottle of wine stood on the table with a couple of glasses by its side. The man closed the door.

"You are English?" he asked suddenly in a villainous accent.

"Yes. I am English."

"Then we talk English, it is better perhaps. You want to see Marie Schmidt, eh? She is not here."

"Well, where is she? I want to find her," Culver asked. "Will she be coming here later?"

"Perhaps." The man shrugged his shoulders. "What do you want to see her about? You have a letter, or something for her?"

"No. I just want to see her—about her uncle, Jean Malet."

"Jean sent you?"

The man was sitting on the edge of the table, and he looked up keenly as he asked the question.

"No. Jean is dead," Culver said calmly. "I was with him when he died. That's why I want to see Marie; to tell her."

The fellow poured himself out a glass of wine before he answered. He seemed uncertain. Suddenly he looked up with an expressionless face.

"If it is important, it is best to tell me," he said.

"Are you a relation of Marie's?" Culver said, ignoring the remark.

"No. Oh no. I know her. She come here sometimes."

"But doesn't she live here?"

"Sometimes."

"Where does she live at other times?"

"I don't know. She comes and goes."

"But hasn't she any relations? Any parents?"

"She never told me."

This was maddening. Culver was sure the man could tell if he would, but with the bovine suspicion of his class, he mistrusted the foreigner and the unknown. These people always saw trouble in anything strange. Culver decided to try the seldom-failing persuasion.

"Look here," he said, after a moment. "I want to get away from Antwerp as soon as I can. If you can find Marie for me I'll pay you for your trouble."

But the fellow did not rise to the bait as eagerly as Culver had hoped. Once more he shrugged his shoulders in an irritating manner.

"All right. I'll try," he said doubtfully. "What is your name?"

"Culver. But she won't know me. Say I'm the Englishman who was with Jean when she came to St. Gules some days ago." The man's eyes lifted slightly. "Tell her," Culver went on, "that she has nothing to be afraid of, and"—a bright thought had come to him—"that among Jean's papers was a little money, about a hundred francs, and as she is the only relation I know of, she ought to have it. You understand?"

"Yes. I understand." He applied himself to the bottle once more, and Culver could see that he was puzzling out something.

"And what's your name?" Culver asked suddenly.

The fellow gulped down his drink. "Peter," he answered. "She will know me."

"Then, Peter, do you think you can get hold of her to-night?"

"I'll try." There came a cunning, sinister expression into his dark eyes. "You come back here about ten. Not before. If I can find Marie, she shall be here."

"Good." Culver felt relieved. "And here's something to go on with," he added, passing the man a note.

He took it without thanks, and crammed it into his pocket.

"All right. You come about ten; not before," he repeated, getting to his feet. "I find her for you. No use coming earlier."

III

Somehow this fellow Peter had not rung true, Culver decided.

He had wandered through the heat, from the noisome atmosphere of the Rue Jan Hoeck, towards the quays, hoping to get some breath of air from the wide river. But though it was cleaner here it was hardly cooler. A brassy haze was spreading over the sky, and there was not a breath of wind. Culver found a seat and sat, gasping, as he thought things out.

There was something wrong about Peter. The man's hands, he recalled, were white and soft, not hands to go with his rough costume and the rougher surroundings in which he lived. And it was clear that money did not speak to him as it spoke to most

peasants. He was furtive, secretive, and undoubtedly unfriendly to his visitor. And that accent had been feigned, too. Peter spoke a deal better English at the end of their interview than when it began.

But if he could get hold of Marie, that was all that mattered, though Culver realised that if he were to talk with Marie Schmidt in the presence of Peter there would be little chance of extracting any secret from her. Still, to find her would be a point gained. He must devise some means of seeing her alone.

A distant roll of thunder told the meaning of the cloudy sky. The air was heavy and still, and the flags drooped limply from the neighbouring masts. A great ship nosing her way up-stream looked shimmering and indistinct in the thick air.

Yes, Marie could tell, if only she would. She at least should be able to put him on to the track of discovering Jean's real identity. She would know names perhaps; certainly whom he had married. And if she were reticent, then he must see if money would not open her mouth.

Exhausted by the heat, Culver fell into reverie. It was so queer to think of any connection between that squalid slum he had just left and the clean, green peace of The Pines at Oldford; of any connection between that black-haired slattern who was still sitting sullenly at the door when he had left the shop, and dainty Mrs. Wilfred Coke, with her easy woman of the world manner and her perfectly manicured hands. Yet there was a connection: there could be no doubt of that.

The first heavy drops of rain began to fall. They roused him. He would have to bolt for it if he were going to get back to his hotel before the storm broke. With collar turned up, he started to run, sweating at every pore in the tropic heat. He reached the hotel

just in time, and stood with a little group of people in the covered entrance watching the tempest as it swept over the city.

Blue-green stabs of vivid lightning played about the great cathedral steeple, and the rain came streaming down in sheets upon the baked cobbles of the deserted streets until the gulleys filled to overflowing.

But neither storm nor heat showed any sign of abating, and Culver took refuge in the hotel café, and sought consolation in a long iced drink and his own unsettled thoughts.

IV

The storm was still rumbling in the distance at ten o'clock that night. A lurid flash of lightning lit up the deserted Rue Jan Hoeck as Culver turned into it.

Uninviting as the place had been in broad daylight, on a pitch-black night it seemed more repulsive than ever. The rough *pavé* was a mass of murky puddles, and the torrential rain had brought forth a medley of unsavoury smells from the sodden earth.

His shoulders hunched against the downpour, Culver pushed on, worried, rather, lest the storm should have upset his plans. It might have delayed Marie, or, likely as not, that idle fellow Peter would not have ventured out into it.

The street was badly lighted, and Culver found it hard in the darkness to pick out the house he was seeking. There was nobody about, he felt he must have overshot No. 47. He stopped and peered at an adjoining doorway, but he could discern no number.

He was passing one of those open spaces where once a house had stood, when a little scuffle in the darkness caused him, instinctively, to halt.

A hoarse voice called something to him in Flemish, and he answered in French that he could not under-

stand. Then, dimly, he made out a figure close by his side, and an electric-torch was turned full into his eyes, dazzling him and causing him to step back in quick alarm. And as he stepped back, it was, so far as he could remember, into a pair of powerful arms which flung round him and pinioned him, helpless.

He let out one sharp cry for help, before a clammy hand was clasped roughly over his mouth, and the next moment sinewy fingers were at his throat, and he fell, struggling and gasping for breath, to the muddy earth.

Those cruel fingers pressed tighter and tighter, and Culver felt his head swimming. Though he fought on, he knew that his efforts were futile. His consciousness was going quickly. His ears were singing and his eyes seemed as though they would burst from their sockets. Then a great blackness came over everything.

It seemed an age afterwards that a tiny voice, far, far away, was speaking his name. It seemed that he lay somewhere, in a strange place dreaming. People were bothering him, trying to wake him, and he wished they would leave him alone. He tried to tell them to stop, and the effort of speech brought him back once more to consciousness. But for the moment he could not quite recall things.

He was in the dark, sitting in the mud, his shoulders supported by unknown hands, and a strange voice was saying: "That's better. You'll do now. Take it easy, old man."

An excited torrent of French followed, a light was flashed at him again, and he was aware, dully, that there were men in uniform at his side. For a moment or two, groping mentally to remember what had happened, he thought he was back in the trenches.

"It's all right. Quite all right," he said stupidly. "I'm not hurt, it's only——"

"Take it easy," that calm, emotionless English voice came from behind him. Then it broke into French.

"My friend will be all right in a moment," it went on. "We had better take him back to the hotel."

Dick Culver turned towards the speaker. He was fast recovering his wits and his memory. He could recall the attack now, clearly, but who this Englishman could be, who knew his name, and knew his hotel, he could not imagine.

"I'm all right now," he said, staggering to his feet. "Have I been here long? Some blackguards went for me—out of the dark. I don't remember any more."

The gendarmes, as he discovered the uniformed men to be, pressed about him, talking volubly. In the rays of their lamps, Culver saw the unknown Englishman to be a tall, lean-visaged man, with an expressionless face and a big calabash pipe in his straight mouth. He appeared completely unperturbed by the situation.

"You speak these chaps' lingo?" he asked laconically, removing his pipe and cramming down the ashes with his forefinger.

"A bit," Culver answered, still dazed.

"I wouldn't if I were you. Not till you've thought about it a bit more." The stranger struck a match and relit his pipe, puffing at it deliberately. "They make a hell of a fuss over nothing, these foreign bobbies," he went on coolly. "You leave it to me."

"But—but——" Culver protested. "Who are you? Why——" He swayed, and the stranger caught him. He was still feeling horribly sick and faint.

The man's queer, impassive voice came to him dimly from a great distance.

"Franklin Parry," he said. "I'm staying in your hotel. Leave it to me."

Culver was glad enough, then, to leave it to this strange man who had appeared, so fortunately, at his side. His head was swimming again. He was just conscious of being helped through a crowd of gaping, furtive-eyed men and women, who had been drawn like vultures to the scene; of an interminable wait, with the buzzing of voices all about him, and of being lifted into a cab. After that, but for a dreadful pain in his throat, there was no clear memory for some time.

He knew that he answered questions mechanically; there was a vague impression of a doctor, but real consciousness only came to him again the next morning when he woke, in bed at the hotel, to find the stranger, Franklin Parry, at his side, looking down at him with mild amusement in his cynical eyes, and saying cheerfully:

"Well, old man, I hope you're all right now. You gave me a bit of a fright last night; I thought you were really bad."

V

Culver roused himself and blinked sleepily at his visitor.

"What the devil did happen last night?" he asked. "I've only the haziest idea after those swine went for me."

Parry was fingering his pipe. He gazed thoughtfully at its charred bowl. He was an older man than Culver, but he looked hard as nails, a powerful man without an ounce of superfluous flesh. His lean face was sunburnt to that sallow tint that comes of years in the tropics.

"I don't know what happened before," he said slowly. "I chanced to hear a yell—in good, full-

blooded English"—he gave a faint smile—"and I went to see what the trouble was. Your language, old man, indicated that there was some trouble."

Culver grinned.

"I don't remember that," he said.

Parry began to load his pipe.

"It wasn't exactly drawing-room chat," he commented dryly. "Anyhow, there were a couple of blighters on to you. I hit one, it felt a good hit, and they scuttled. Then those chattering bobbies came up, and—well, we got you back here after a bit. Mind smoke?"

"No. Go ahead. But I say, I'm awfully grateful to you——"

Parry interrupted, with a grim smile.

"No need to be grateful, I've been in too many scraps myself. I wouldn't have butted in but for your fruity language." He puffed solemnly at the huge pipe.

"But—how did you know who I was?" Culver asked, in a bemused voice.

"I'm staying here. I was standing in the porch yesterday when you bolted in out of the rain. I got your name because I knew a Dick Culver out in the Congo once. I saw the name in the book and thought it might be him."

"No. I don't recall any of my crowd out there," Culver said. "Where'd he come from, Hampshire?"

Parry smiled enigmatically.

"Poor old Dick never talked about his family. I don't think he was a credit to them. But look here, we've got to tell the same lie. Those damned bobbies will be round here soon, and I pitched them any sort of tale last night. To save trouble. You remember anything?"

"Practically nothing. You told me your name and advised me not to talk for a bit."

"Always good advice in a police row. It's so hard to change your mind afterwards."

"But I don't quite understand."

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know what you were doing in that neighbourhood last night," he said. "It hasn't got altogether a savoury name in Antwerp—that's why the bobbies go in twos. And I don't want to know. That's your business." He looked Culver straight in the face. There was a queer smile in the steady, bleached eyes. "But my experience is that these foreign police are more trouble than they're worth."

"Now take last night's business. You can't do anything. The blighters who went for you are gone. Unless you suspect anybody, the police will never find them. But, by Gad! old man, if they start they'll keep you messing about answering questions, trying to identify things by the score, and filling in forms, and the Lord knows what, till you're sick of it. I remember in Vigo some years ago, a chap came for me with a knife, and those infernal police kept me hanging about in that foul spot for five weeks. I'd drop it if I were you."

Franklin Parry spoke impassively, almost in a monotone, punctuating each sentence with a puff of smoke, like a man recounting some adventure. But the sound, common sense of his advice appealed to Culver. It was no good getting entangled with the authorities for no real purpose. If they started investigations heaven alone knew where they might lead to. It might drag the whole story of old Jean into an unwelcome publicity.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "Perhaps you're right, Parry. I suppose the men were just out to rob me. I don't suspect anybody——"

He stopped suddenly as the thought flashed into his

mind for the first time. Did he suspect anybody? That fellow Peter? He knew he would be coming along at that hour with money on him.

"No. No. I don't suspect anybody," he finished hurriedly.

Parry seemed unaware of his hesitation.

"Then drop it," he said shortly. "Tell them you can't remember anything—and stick to it."

"I will," Culver agreed.

Parry appeared relieved. He sat on talking for some time. He attracted Culver. His hard, cynical manner appeared to cloak a more human nature and a keen sense of humour. And Culver was thoroughly conscious that, but for this man's opportune appearance last night, things might have gone badly for him.

Franklin Parry was a rubber merchant, he said, and was just back from the Belgian Congo on a year's holiday. He had, in fact, only arrived in Antwerp on the previous day, and was hesitating whether to go to Paris or straight on to London.

And the tale he had told the police Culver heard elaborated an hour later when a fussy, little, bearded, plainclothes man arrived, with a big attaché-case full of papers and an air of great importance.

Culver, still in bed at Parry's suggestion, professed a very slight knowledge of French. Parry acted as interpreter from time to time. Culver, he said, was an hotel acquaintance, and the two had gone out together for a walk after a very good dinner. He stressed the excellence of the hotel dinner and forced a watery smile from the bearded policeman.

M. Culver wanted to see the dock district, and they had wandered that way, and although M. Parry had warned him of the danger of that rough neighbourhood, M. Culver, out of curiosity, had insisted upon venturing down the Rue Jan Hoeck. Parry, trying to

dissuade him, had lagged behind until, hearing his companion's call for help, he had rushed forward to his aid. The rest doubtless the efficient and gallant gendarmes had reported.

They satisfied the little policeman that this was their story, and, vastly amused, Culver heartily agreed with the suggestion that really he, or rather the excellent dinner, was entirely to blame. The policeman grinned sympathetically and departed, having made copious notes.

Parry saw him off and returned to Culver's room.

"That's that," he said. "I don't think the little chap was sorry. It would have been a hopeless job. Well, good-bye, old man. Glad it's no worse. I think I shall clear off to Paris at noon."

Culver jumped from the bed.

"No, I'm damned if you do," he said gratefully. "You've got me out of a deuce of a mess, and you don't go till we've had that giddy meal you described so convincingly. You'll lunch with me. Where's the best place in Antwerp?"

Parry's smile was one of real pleasure.

"All right. So long as we don't play the sequel again," he answered.

CHAPTER V

I

THE lunch was a great success. Franklin Parry improved on acquaintance. He had knocked about all over the world, and he was full of stories of odd experiences in the unswept corners of the earth.

But there was a strange streak of shyness in the man; he was lonely, and, though he welcomed Culver's companionship, he seemed loath to force his company upon him. It was this unsuspected reticence that gave him his brusque, cynical manner, Culver decided.

And Dick Culver was feeling fit again, too. There were some ugly bruises round his throat, which he had noticed when he was shaving, and the throat still felt sore from the grip of those cruel fingers, but otherwise he was as cheery as ever he had been.

Parry spoke of his vague plans. He wanted to get some golf and a bit of fox-hunting later in the year. But he rather funk'd going home, he said. Things had changed so much, and somehow he didn't seem to fit in with his few relatives and old acquaintances in England.

"They think I'm a barbarian, and I think they're self-satisfied snobs," he said with a touch of bitterness. "It would be all right if we didn't tell one another what we thought, but we do."

Culver laughed. He could sympathise with his companion's feelings. He, too, somehow, had never fitted in, easily, with conventional life; he, too, was a lonely man.

He pondered a problem which had been flitting

about his mind ever since the morning. Last night's mishap had badly upset his plans. It might have lost him the chance of finding Marie Schmidt. Unless—unless Peter really had had something to do with that attack.

Anyhow, he was going back to the shop to see. And it would be uncommonly useful to have a companion with him this time, and what better companion than Parry? He needn't tell him too much; for that matter, he felt he need tell him nothing. But some explanation was due to him.

Culver leaned across the table with a guilty sort of smile.

"Look here, Parry," he said, "I want to tell you something about last night's affair."

Franklin Parry looked up with mild interest.

"Well?" he said laconically. "I don't want to know unless you want to tell me."

"But I do, I want your help."

Parry sipped his wine, and his queer, light eyes lifted slowly to Culver's face. They seemed to be appraising him.

"That's another story," he said in his expressionless way. "I won't promise till I hear what it is."

Culver weighed his words carefully. He wanted to know enough but not too much.

"I had an appointment at a house in that street," he said frankly.

"Yes." Parry toyed with his glass, his eyes fixed on the table. "I imagined you weren't there for a walk."

"I was going to see a girl, the niece of an old waiter chap I knew at St. Gules. He died, and, well, sort of left me to settle up his affairs. There was—er—some money, and I wanted to give it to her," Culver explained rather hurriedly.

"Much?" Parry queried with unexpected directness.

Culver floundered.

"No, no—that is, about a hundred francs," he answered.

"Why didn't you post it? It would have saved you trouble," Parry said in a bored way.

Culver tried to make his story more plausible.

"Well, you see, I wanted to talk to the girl; tell her about her uncle and that sort of thing. Besides I wasn't quite sure of the address."

He felt peculiarly stupid, as if his lie was already discovered, but Franklin Parry showed no sign of doubt—hardly of interest. Culver went on and related the story of his afternoon visit to the shop. Parry grinned as he finished.

"Looks as if your pal Peter thought he might as well have the money for himself," he said.

Culver nodded. "I had the same idea too," he agreed.

"Well, where do I come in?" Parry asked.

"I want to go back to the shop. Part curiosity, but mostly to see if I can find this girl. I must get hold of her if I can."

Parry lit a cigar. "Now think a minute," he said. "If you go back to that shop and find your old friend Peter with a Lord Almighty welt on the jaw—I hit someone mighty hard last night, I tell you—what are you going to do about it? Don't forget we've told one tale to the police. We can't go back on that."

The thought had not occurred to Culver.

"That's true," he said. "I suppose I can do nothing."

"Well, get that into your head. Now, this girl; who'd you say she was?"

Culver told him again, with a little more detail, and Parry listened very attentively.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll come with you. But for the Lord's sake don't go and get into more trouble."

II

They finished their lunch in a leisurely manner, then strolled off towards the docks. Franklin Parry displayed no further curiosity in the queer story Culver had told him. That was so characteristic of the man—his extraordinary lack of curiosity.

It was a dull day, with a cool breeze after the storm, and the Rue Jan Hoeck looked as forbidding as ever when they turned into it. Some ragged children were playing on the vacant land where Culver had been attacked. They gaped at the strangers as they passed.

Just before they reached No. 47, Parry said :

"Want me to come in with you?"

Culvert thought quickly. If Marie were there, perhaps it would be better not.

"No, I'll go alone," he answered. "It might scare them if two of us turned up. I'll sing out if I want you again." He laughed nervously.

Then they came to the shop. The door was shut and padlocked. Through the grimy window Culver saw with amazement that the place had been cleared. All the welter of rubbish had gone, and bare dirty boards showed indistinctly through the dull panes.

"Well, I'm damned! What do you make of this, Parry?" he asked, astounded, and almost doubting his own eyes.

Franklin Parry's face betrayed no feeling. He blew a thick cloud of smoke.

"Saves a lot of trouble, old man," he answered.

"I'd forget sweet Marie if I were you. Don't be too sentimental; it doesn't pay."

Just for a moment a ghost of a smile flickered at the corners of the straight mouth, and Franklin Parry looked as if he were enjoying a secret joke. Culver noticed it, and it made him feel foolish.

"I give you my word this place was occupied yesterday," he protested.

"I don't doubt it. The only thing that matters is that it isn't now."

Culver glared blankly at the grimy windows. He was savage, not only at having come on a fool's errand, but at the realisation that his last chance of finding Marie Schmidt had gone.

A little group of curious neighbours was beginning to collect. They seeped out of the sordid houses and stood at a little distance, staring suspiciously and gabbling derisively.

A slatternly woman, with flaming red hair, yelled something in Flemish across the street, and Culver replied in his indifferent French with a question as to whether she knew where Peter had gone. But she only laughed at him and broke into a stream of apparent banter.

Culver felt more and more embarrassed. He hated being the centre of this crowd's jeering curiosity. He glanced at his companion. Parry was pulling stolidly at his pipe, as if unaware of the grinning people.

Culver said suddenly: "Let's get out of this."

They had reached the end of the slum and had turned into the main road before Parry commented in the most matter-of-fact voice:

"The lady with the red hair didn't think much of your pals, old man."

"What! Do you understand that infernal jargon?" Culver asked quickly.

“ Yes, a bit. Got some of ’em working for me out in the Congo.”

“ Well, what did she say ?”

Parry gave one of his solemn smiles.

“ Put politely,” he said, “ she described us as qualified policemen who always arrived after the birds had flown. And the birds, meaning your pals, she suggested had beaten us again, and always would. They cleared off about six last night, it seems, and the Rue Jan Hoeck has been enjoying the joke ever since.”

CHAPTER VI

I

CULVER drove up to his rooms in Bloomsbury as St. Pancras Church clock was striking nine the next morning.

Almost to the very moment that the Antwerp boat moored at Parkstone Quay he had been undecided whether to go back to Oldford or whether to go straight to town. His feelings were for the former, but the broad streak of common sense in his nature told him that he would gain little by seeing Mrs. Coke again until he knew more about her. And he knew nothing more.

But he might pick up something among the artist crowd in London. And he was fully determined to continue with his quest. His complete defeat at Antwerp had only made him stubborn. Mrs. Coke's contemptuous behaviour, as it seemed to him, rankled. He was going to show her that he was not quite such a gullible fool as she thought him, and until he had satisfied himself that there was nothing more he could do to carry out his vague, uncomprehended promise to Jean, he was not going to rest.

Franklin Parry had seen him off, and Culver found that he parted with that strange man with considerable regret. Almost, he wished he had been more candid with him—told him the story of Jean's letter. The man inspired confidence with his cynical, unperturbable manner. And it was always easier to confide in a stranger, particularly a man like Parry, who asked so few questions.

Culver had pondered this a good deal on the journey. The two men had arranged to meet when Parry came to England, as he said he was coming,

within a week or ten days. Culver rather wished he had persuaded him to come now. He had a feeling that he could have done so, but Parry was so queer, so shy almost, afraid of forcing his company unwanted; and Culver had been considerably rattled by the extraordinary turn events had taken, and he had wanted to get away alone, to recover his sense of values.

He decided to drop a line to Parry at his London bank that day, and urge him to come over. He might even suggest a week's golf somewhere; Oldford, perhaps. That mightn't be a bad scheme.

Culver found his rooms cheerless and enveloped in dust sheets. The retired butler and his wife, who kept the house, were not expecting him, and were a little upset to be caught unprepared. Culver placated them.

"I shall only be in town for a day or two at the most," he said. "Just fix the bedroom; that's all I want. I'll feed at the club."

But his intimate, little club was closed for its annual cleaning, and he found himself a guest at the Literary Union, a huge caravanserai of a place in which he knew hardly anybody, where strange servants regarded him with seeming indifference. And all the men he had hoped to see, from whom he might extract some gossip about Wilfred Coke's early life—and his wife's—were out of town.

Culver hung about the library of the club till after tea-time.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to get hold of one or two men on the telephone, and as fruitlessly to turn up Wilfred Coke in old reference books. Feeling thoroughly disgruntled, he determined, towards six o'clock, to try the Palmerston, in Chelsea, where he was pretty sure to find some of the shiftless, painting crowd, drinking and gossiping in the bar.

To the uninitiate the Palmerston is as unlike a

Bohemian resort as it well could be. "The Pam" the artists call it, a rather dingy public-house, a gin palace of the nineties, that has not changed its appearance since.

Culver jumped from a bus in the King's Road and made his way to the Pam's saloon bar. The big room at the back was stuffy and rank with stale smoke. Job Doran, the R.A., was perched on a high stool by the bar, sipping a long gin and soda, and buying drinks for the little court of admirers which clustered about him.

He nodded to Culver as he came in, and went on with a dissertation on wireless. Culver bought himself a drink and took it to one of the tables by the window.

Close by, two or three models sat languidly before glasses of stout, their eyes fixed on the great man. A few tradesmen on the far side were arguing animatedly about Chelsea's football prospects for the coming season, and an airless heat pervaded everything.

Presently Culver became conscious that one of the girls was staring hard at him. He looked up, curiously, and recognised her as Doreen, a model who had been a great beauty in her time, a statuesque creature, with a dead white skin and raven hair. She smiled.

"Haven't seen you for a long time. You come back again, Mr. Culver?" she said hopefully.

Culver shook his head.

"No. Only just to look round; and see if I can find any old pals, beside you, Doreen. Have a drink?"

She left her companions and came to sit beside him.

"Thank you, Mr. Culver. May I have a Guinness?"

He fetched it for her.

"And how are things, Doreen?" he asked cheerily.

"Any of the old crowd still alive?"

"Oh, I don't know," she answered. "Let me see.

You used to work in Mr. Knowles' place. He's dead, you know."

"Yes, poor chap."

Knowles was an elderly man, with whom Culver had shared a studio during his brief adventure into art. And, it occurred to him, Knowles had known Wilfred Coke.

"Yes," he went on. "Poor old Dick Knowles. And you remember Wilfred Coke, I suppose, Doreen?"

"I should think I do," she said, her big eyes opening wide. "There was a nice man, if you like. But what a wife!"

Culver tried to appear unconcerned. In a girl of Doreen's type, any obvious interest would arouse suspicion.

"I don't think I met her. She was nice, too, was she?" he commented casually, pulling out a case and idly tapping a cigarette on the table.

"Nice! Oh, my God! Here, you remember what happened to poor Mr. Coke, don't you?"

"He was drowned. It was awfully sad."

"Drowned! And why? She drove him to it. She led him a hell of a life, that woman."

"Come, come, Doreen. You mustn't say things like that." Culver was shocked at the venom in the woman's voice.

"All right. I know, that's all." She turned, with mild offence, to her drink.

"What, was she jealous?" Culver asked, with an uneasy laugh.

"Jealous—no. She didn't care what he did so long as she got his money. It was money, money, all the time. God knows what she did with it. She bled him white, Mr. Culver." Doreen leaned forward confidentially. "And to look at her you'd never guess what she was like, kind of quiet, easy-going she

seemed. But she was bad, real bad. Not the ordinary, but rotten. Look what happened when poor Mr. Coke got ill."

"What happened?"

"Oh, she left him, then. Wasn't any more good to her. Started an antique shop, if you please. And everyone used to say, 'Poor Mrs. Coke, wasn't it brave of her.'" The girl sneered.

"Doreen, who was she?" Culver said, feigning a mild interest.

"I don't know. They'd been married for years. Bill, they used to call her. She was a painter—not bad, landscapes, you know."

"But Mr. Coke must have been a little—well—difficult at times," he said, instinctively driven to defend Mrs. Coke.

"Drink, you mean," Doreen retorted frankly. "That was all her fault. When I first used to sit for him, he was all right. If you ask me, he did it deliberately—to kill himself. And not the first, either."

Culver was really perturbed. He discounted much of what the model said. These women developed sentimental admirations for the painters for whom they sat, and wives were never too popular with them. But there was something behind this outburst of Doreen's, and somehow he felt shabby, gossiping in this way about a dead man and a living woman.

Mrs. Coke, as he remembered her, calm and gracious, fitted ill with this lurid story of avarice and cruelty. And yet, his brain working quickly, he recalled another inconsistency in Mrs. Coke's story. Her suggestion of poverty at her husband's death: of need to sell their furniture. Either that was a lie, or Doreen's statement was. And he thought of the girl's sneer at those who had said how brave it was of Mrs. Coke to take to business. He had made much the same remark.

"I suppose Mr. Coke was pretty hard up before the end?" he asked.

"He was, yes. She'd taken it all from him. But not her. Came down here to the funeral in a great big car and furs."

"Oh, well," Culver put in hurriedly. "Let's hope it wasn't as bad as you think." He was disgusted, in a way, with the whole story. He almost wished he had never heard it. In his mind the two men, Jean of the Natation and Wilfred Coke, associated themselves. Two broken men—both connected with the same woman.

He turned the conversation to more trivial matters, and presently left the Palmerston, a fit of deep depression upon him, and a sense of the futility of the self-appointed task in which he had engaged.

II

Culver went down to Oldford the next morning. Through many worrying hours on the previous evening, he had come to a decision. He was not going to fret himself with this business much longer.

It was only making trouble for himself. Better drop it, as Franklin Parry had been so fond of saying. But before he dropped it he was going to make one final, direct appeal to Mrs. Coke. If she were that hard, callous woman that Doreen had depicted, then a frank and unsentimental attack would be more likely to succeed.

As he had schemed it out, he would go to her, quite blandly, and throw the situation at her. He would say: "I have reason to believe that you know a good deal more about Jean than you told me. And I know more about him than I told you. If you don't intend to trust me, don't; but I want to know who his relations may be in this country. I have something to tell

them when I am satisfied that they are the proper persons to hear it."

That was the sort of thing. Chucked straight at her she might give herself away; or, better still, meet candour with candour. He could do no more. If this failed, well, he had tried to keep faith with Jean, and would have kept faith with himself.

And then he would forget the whole affair; wire Parry, perhaps—he had a hankering for that man's company—and suggest a trip to Scotland to see if they could find some fishing and golf there. The Continent had, for the time being, ceased to attract him; it brought back too many memories of St. Gules and Antwerp.

The Palace Hotel at Oldford could not give him a room and, not altogether unwillingly, he sought a humbler place. That disturbing girl, Ann Gray, would be at the Palace, and just then he did not feel equal to facing her. She had something to do with Mrs. Coke's secret he was convinced, and now he was anxious to be done with subterfuge and tortuous ways.

Yet Ann was one of the first people he met that afternoon when he turned into the long, main street from the old-fashioned Blue Boar, where he was staying.

Ann was in a rakish two-seater car, driving skilfully through the crowded street. She crammed on her four-wheel brakes as she caught sight of him, and stopped dead by his side.

"Hallo, Richard Culver," she drawled. "You come back again, or haven't you been away?"

He tried to laugh naturally.

"Back again for a bit," he said.

"Been to St. Gules already?"

He nodded, then with an effort:

"And found it as you said, a rotten hole," he laughed.

"So you've come back to stay?" she persisted, looking at him with curious interest.

"No. Not for long." He met her big, hazel eyes quite steadily, wondering how much she knew, and suddenly conscious that he wished she were not a friend of Mrs. Coke's.

His even gaze seemed to disturb her. She dropped her eyes in mild confusion.

"You must be fond of travelling," she commented, then looked up with the old mockery in her smile. "And where is restless Richard Culver off to this time?" she demanded.

"Scotland, I think," he said blandly. Her taunting, lazy voice had roused him. He did not want her to think him a complete fool, and if she were asking for a purpose, Scotland was as good as any other place to tell her.

She made no comment on his reply, but asked abruptly :

"You going to see Bill?"

He was not ready with a denial.

"I—er—I was, yes," he faltered.

"Jump in then," she said, throwing open the door. "I'm going up there, I'll take you!"

He could hardly refuse, though instantly he realised his mistake. He wanted to find Mrs. Coke alone, and now it seemed that he was going to be let in for another party.

"If she's got people there again I don't think I'll come after all," he protested lamely. "I want to see her on business, and I'd better wait."

"Oh, come on," Ann insisted. "There'll be nobody there—not even me. I'm only going to collect Elsa. We're going out to Flackston to tennis at the rectory. Bill won't come, she's got the glooms. She gets like that sometimes, all jumps and headaches and aspirin."

He was in the car now, almost against his will, and Ann had started off nearly as violently as she had stopped.

"Then I certainly don't think she'll want to see me," Culver said.

"Depends what you want to see her about," Ann replied, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "She's always well enough to do her business. She's got to be, poor dear. Bill works hard, you know."

She turned towards him for a moment, as if to emphasise her words.

"I'm sure of it," he said. "Still, my visit can wait if she's really seedy."

"We'll ask Elsa," Ann answered curtly.

They slowed as they came to the gate of The Pines, and Ann honked loudly on the horn.

"I'm not going in," she said, "it's a beastly place to turn. This will fetch Elsa." She hooted again in a deliberate way. "My signal," she laughed.

He had descended, and stood by the car still uncertain whether to go into the house or not. The opportunity seemed a good one, yet if Mrs. Coke were really indisposed she would not be in the best mood to receive his attack. To prevent Ann from returning to that disquieting, personal mood of hers, he was talking mechanically about the car.

Then a woman appeared strolling slowly down the drive, swinging her racket and puffing at a cigarette.

"Oh, Elsa," Ann called. "How's Bill? I collected Mr. Culver in the High Street; he wants to see her if she isn't too depressed."

This Elsa, of whom Culver had heard so much, hesitated for a second as she caught sight of him, surprised, obviously, to find Ann with a stranger.

"Oh—er—Bill," she began a little nervously. "She's rather poorish. She's been lying down since lunch."

"Then I won't go in," Culver said definitely.

He found himself staring at Elsa in a curious manner. She was dark and pretty; a woman of about thirty, he judged. There was something opulent about the simplicity of her dress; it looked so particularly smart, from the dainty white shoes, to the daring little hat pulled down over her black hair. And the woman's face was typical, too, but of what he could not quite decide.

Ann broke in: "But you don't know one another, do you? Richard Culver, this is Bill's pal Elsa, Elsa Mayer."

"How do you do?" he said conventionally. "I'm sorry about Mrs. Coke, I won't bother her to-day. She was going to show me her furniture some time, but I'll wait till to-morrow."

Elsa smiled, a little nervously, he thought, and again he searched his memory to recall who it was that she suggested. It was almost as if he had met her before somewhere.

But she answered naturally enough, and he helped her into the car. Ann turned to wave good-bye, and Elsa Mayer looked over her shoulder with a formal little smile, and at that moment it came to him, flashed into his brain with staggering certainty.

He knew now where he had seen this woman before, and, knowing, he felt dazed. It had been in the fishing town at St. Gules on the morning Jean had died. The whole scene rose clearly in his mind, Madelaine, standing at her door uttering her acid phrases, and a little way off, angry, startled and fearful, the peasant girl.

That same resentful look of alarm had come over Elsa's face for a second when she had first seen him standing by Ann's car. He was sure of it. Elsa Mayer and Marie Schmidt were one and the same person.

And more than that; Elsa had recognised him.

III

Far up the road, Ann's two-seater was disappearing in a cloud of dust that whitened the bordering hedges. Culver gazed stupidly after it, then turned to the house, which seemed so peacefully asleep in its mantle of shrubs under the summer sun.

It was very quiet in the lane, a lazy quietness, broken only by the humming of insects. Culver walked slowly on in the wake of the now vanished car. He found a gate a hundred yards or so further along and climbed it, wandering across a sun-baked field, where cattle sought the shade of the hedges, until he came to the marsh land by the edge of the river.

Away to the left, the tiled roof of The Pines showed mellow in the strong light. He could see a patch of creeper-covered wall and a wide open window, and that window attracted him as if through it he were able to enter, and wrench from the house some of the secrets that it must hold.

And he meant to wrench from it its secrets now. This meeting with Elsa had given a completely new turn to his ideas—an ugly turn.

Elsa knew him, and was plainly alarmed; probably knew of his journey to Antwerp, possibly of the attack made upon him in the darkness of that miserable slum. Probably Mrs. Coke knew about it, too; and the girl Ann. They were all in it—whatever it was—he was sure.

And it must be something pretty desperate, too, some secret of more than a family scandal if what he surmised were correct. But what was to be done? He could hardly go to Mrs. Coke now, and tackle her as he had intended. Nor could he very well accuse Elsa

Mayer of being Marie Schmidt and party to a murderous attack made upon him.

For, after all, he had no proof. It was mere conjecture—Franklin Parry's conjecture as well as his own, it was true—but though Elsa be Marie, there was nothing to show that she had been in the Rue Jan Hoeck that night.

Culver felt dazed. He could not force his thoughts into a definite channel. The whole circumstances were outrageously absurd, and yet undeniably true. Who was this Elsa, this dark-eyed, conventional, but rather foreign-looking woman? Could she have been Jean's niece? If so, where did Peter come in? And what was Elsa doing disguised as Marie Schmidt? And Ann Gray?

Culver went over and over again the whole series of events of the past few days, and found himself staring at the ebbing tide baffled and angry.

He wanted another point of view on the problem, someone with whom to discuss it frankly, and at once his thoughts went to Franklin Parry, with his queer, cynical common sense. Parry was undoubtedly the man to advise him. He would wire Parry; go over to France and see him if needs be. If he could only get Parry interested in the problem, there would be a chance to elucidate some of its mysteries.

Culver knocked out his pipe and strolled thoughtfully back to the lane. He would wire to Parry's bank and hope that they would forward the message.

IV

A country motor omnibus on the point of starting, as he came out of the post-office, decided Culver, on the spur of the moment, to seek counsel in the solitude of one of the vast, heath-clad commons inland from the town.

He craved solitude. Oldford, with its careless crowds and merriment, jarred on his nerves. Half an hour later he descended from the bus at the Bidely cross-roads and found himself in a glorious waste of heather and gorse and bracken, with little else but a wayside cottage and a distant farm-house in a clump of trees in view.

He took a sandy track that led diagonally across the sweet-scented heath and walked on, absorbed in his thoughts for some time. Presently a squat, flint tower of an ancient church appeared in the distance. There were no farms about, only a few trees, through which what was evidently the parsonage showed, and the little church close at hand, in the midst of a sea of purple and green and gold.

Culver made his way towards it. It looked almost unreal, this little, deserted building that seemed to have been dropped by mistake in the middle of a moor. It was to the church, clearly, that the track he had been following led, and it ended at a gate in a lichen-covered, flint wall that enclosed an overgrown churchyard.

There was nobody about; no sound of life even from the adjoining parsonage. The place was as lonely as the graves, half-hidden in the rank grass. Culver tried the south door, but it was locked. From some yellowed notices stuck in the porch he discovered that this was Bidely Church, and he wondered where Bidely village might be.

It was a queer little building, with lancet windows, a couple of hundred years older than its upstanding tower. Culver peered through one of the windows. There were repairs of some sort going on inside. But it appeared to be a curiously untouched church, with old, high, box pews and a three-decker pulpit.

Culver loved old churches, and this was a rare

example. He tried the sanctuary door without success, then turned towards the parsonage to see if he could get the key there.

The house was, in its way, as interesting a building as the church. It was of red brick, built in late Stuart times, a long, narrow, L-shaped house, but one room deep in the longer wing. The front door stood wide open, showing a white-panelled hall. Culver could see through the glass-paned door, on the other side of the hall, into the garden beyond.

Nobody answered his first knock, and he tried again. After a few moments an elderly parson appeared from the garden. He was panting a little as he came in, and he mopped a moist brow.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Culver began, "but I wondered if I might have the key of your church."

"Why, certainly," the parson answered. "But not my church, sir, unfortunately. I am but a stranger here, not even a locum. I am merely the temporary tenant of the rectory in Mr. Britain's absence."

Culver smiled. The man was so genially pedantic.

"Now let me see," the parson went on, fussing like an agitated old maid, his round face puckered like a child's in thought. "The key, now, the key; where did Ellis put that key? Ah! Here it is." He produced an enormous weapon of iron from a hook by the door. "Now, sir, if you are a student of old churches you shall see a little gem."

Culver followed him down the drive, and as the parson came into the full light, he recognised him as the friendly old man whom he had so curtly snubbed at the Palace Hotel a few nights before.

"I am, indeed, very much interested in churches," Culver said, a little embarrassed.

The parson beamed. "Not many pilgrims find their way here," he said. "Have you come far?"

"From Oldford."

"I thought I recognised your face. I think we can say we have met."

"Yes. Yes. I remember you, sir," Culver put in hurriedly.

The key turned easily in the door.

"Now," said the old man, graciously extending a hand that Culver might enter first, "see what St. Nicholas at Bidely can offer you."

And it had many treasures to offer, which the parson explained at length. He was an odd, old fellow, loquacious and an enthusiastic antiquary. He expatiated upon the early font, and went into raptures over the Easter sepulchre, then drew Culver's attention to two windows on the south side of the nave.

"But these are the gems of the whole church, I am told. Very wonderful, are they not?" His voice dropped reverently.

Culver gazed at the windows, narrow lancets ablaze with colour. The sun threw rich shafts of blue and red light through the tiny mosaic panes.

"That's early glass, isn't it?" he asked.

"Thirteenth century," the old man answered proudly. "In perfect condition, and practically unknown to any but students. Look at them; they might have been made quite recently. Great craftsmen, the Old Masters. No shoddy work there."

Culver went nearer, fascinated by the depth of colour, and interested to discern the crude design of little panels the rich border enclosed. What the parson had said was true; it seemed impossible to believe this work had been finished seven hundred years ago.

The old man led him to the sanctuary.

"This," he explained, "is more modern. By a couple of centuries." He laughed at his small joke.

"But, alas! that dreadful worm has got into the roof. Mr. Britain is having it treated in his absence."

He prosed on for some time, amusing rather than boring Culver, for his mind was diverted from the worries which had filled it that afternoon. And then the old man insisted that he come back and have tea: "Or something a little stronger, if you like," he added, with a smile.

They sat for some time under a great copper beech on the lawn. It was cool and restful there, and though Culver missed much of what his garrulous, kindly host said, the old parson didn't seem to be aware of it.

He was the Reverend Clement Foster, he said, and for years he had been a schoolmaster.

"I am afraid I am a very unworthy priest," he mused sadly. "I have had no cure for many years."

Culver felt awkward.

"But I expect you've had your share of work, sir," he said.

"Yes. Yes," the old man agreed.

In the course of their talk it transpired that Clement Foster had taken the rectory for six weeks. He had been ordered a complete rest. "My heart is not so young as it used to be," he said, tapping his portly chest. He was looked after by a woman from a cottage some half a mile away.

"But Mr. Britain very kindly left his man here. Ellis, a nice young fellow. Quite a Crichton. Drives a car, does the garden, and acts as verger. Ellis shall drive you back, Mr. Culver; he has to go into Oldford this evening."

Then the parson pleased Culver by recalling one of his books and commenting on it with a detail that proved he had read it. And altogether Culver spent a very happy couple of hours at Bidely, and he was quite sincere when, as the parson stood by the car

bidding him "Good-bye," he accepted his invitation to lunch one day soon.

"I find it very charming, but just a little lonely here," he said. "I seldom have company, except on Sundays when the curate from Flackston is here for duty."

A prosy, but not a bad old bird, Culver summed him up on the drive home. He liked the good things of life, and seemed to have the means to enjoy them.

Ellis brought the car up smartly to the Blue Boar. He was a lout of a fellow, but a good driver, and he grinned like a schoolboy at the half-crown Culver gave him as he thanked him.

"Hope we'll see you at Bidely again, sir," he said cheerfully.

"I hope so," Culver answered, as he went into the hotel.

The girl in the office called to him as he went by. "Telegram for you, Mr. Culver," she said.

Culver tore open the flimsy envelope.

"Good man. Coming down to-night. Parry," he read.

V

Franklin Parry arrived by the last train. Culver was on the platform, and he felt really relieved to see Parry's slow smile as he descended from a first-class compartment.

He looked sprucer, Culver thought. He was wearing a new overcoat and a new grey felt hat, but the inevitable calabash pipe was between his teeth.

"Hallo, old man," he said. "I was damned glad to get your wire."

"I'm glad you got it," Culver replied heartily. "I thought you were still abroad."

Parry shook his head.

"Came over last night," he said. "One day in

Paris was enough for me. I'd hoped to find you still in Town. But this is better. By Jove! this is good air—this is what I want."

Culver turned to the porter who had collected a couple of suitcases and a bag of golf-clubs.

"Shove 'em on a cab," he said. "The Blue Boar. I've booked a room for you there, Parry."

As they drove down the hill to the town, Franklin Parry outlined his wanderings in the past two days, and never once referred to Culver's carefully worded telegram. He spoke as though he had come down merely to play golf and enjoy a holiday, and it was Culver himself who had first to open the subject of the real reason for which he had sent the wire.

That was when they had found a deserted corner in the old-fashioned smoking-room, and Parry had ordered: "Two whisky sodas—big ones."

Culver took a pull at his drink.

"Well, things have developed," he said tersely.

Parry nodded.

"So I judged," he answered, with no trace of curiosity. Then, with a queer smile: "Nobody's been going for you again down here, I hope."

"Oh, Lord, no. But you remember the girl I spoke of, Marie Schmidt?"

"Yes."

"Well, I met her this afternoon, here in Oldford."

For the first time Culver saw Franklin Parry roused from his imperturbable manner. His loose-knit frame seemed to stiffen, and he pulled his pipe from his mouth with a jerky movement.

"You met her here? Where?" he asked sharply.

Culver grinned. "I thought you'd be surprised," he said. "Yes, I met her and was introduced to her——"

"As Marie Schmidt?"

"No, as Elsa Mayer. A peculiarly well-dressed

young woman, who is staying with an artist's widow, a Mrs. Coke, who has a house here."

Parry had reverted to his normal calm, and was puffing steadily at his pipe. But his eyes were keen, beneath the part-closed lids, as he gazed through the smoke.

"Quite sure it wasn't really Elsa Mayer?" he asked quietly. "I wouldn't jump too quickly, if I were you. Think, Culver, think. People can be devilish like one another without being the same."

"I have thought—a good deal," Culver said earnestly. "There is a chance, I grant you, that I'm mistaken. But I don't think I am. No, Parry, I'm sure," he went on, with an emphatic nod. "Not only the eyes, but the expression in them. It was the same. And she recognised me, too. That settled it. She started when she caught sight of me."

But Parry would not be convinced.

"This sounds damned queer," he said, with a half smile. "Did you give her the hundred francs?"

Culver flushed. He had felt that lame story he had told in Antwerp had not carried conviction.

"Look here, Parry," he began. "There's a bit more behind it than I told you——"

"Not really!" Parry commented dryly.

"A good deal more," Culver went on. "There's an extraordinary mystery about it all, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. And I want your advice and help, if you'll give it."

Parry prodded at his pipe with a match-stalk. He was growing more serious.

"You do look for trouble, old man," he said. His tone suggested that he wished his companion had not made this request.

"I don't care if it's trouble or not, I'm going to look into this business as far as I can see," Culver retorted, a little heatedly.

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"Listen first of all, and tell me what you make of it," Culver said. "The story starts about ten days ago." And he told that story frankly, save for the details of Jean's last words.

That he still held a sacred trust. It could not affect the present circumstances, so far as he could see. So long as Parry knew that Jean was an Englishman, it would be sufficient.

Franklin Parry listened to every word intently. He had laid aside his pipe and was leaning forward, his sallow face expressionless as a mask, save for the eyes. They hardly moved from Culver's worried face; they seemed to be registering every shade of expression, and questioning all the time.

"That's the position, Parry," Culver said, as he finished. "I'm certain of the girl. But what's behind it? Will you help?"

Parry picked up his glass and gulped the remainder of his drink.

"It's certainly queer. But what's the odds? Is it worth while butting in?" he asked, after a moment's pause. "It can't do you any good, and it may lead to a packet of trouble."

He spoke patiently, as though he were reasoning with a headstrong child. And this tone irritated Culver.

"I'm going on with it, anyhow," he said stubbornly. "I give you my word on that—trouble or no. But I've no right to drag you into it, I can see that. Let's forget it, shall we?"

Parry looked hurt.

"No. No, old man," he answered slowly. "I'm not going to quit, if that's how you feel about it. I'll help—as far as I can."

CHAPTER VII

I

THEY played a round of golf the next morning. That was Parry's suggestion.

"It's no good rushing things," he advised. "If there's anything in what you say, your friend Bill Coke is watching you like a cat. No need to advertise the fact that you're watching her. You and I are down here for golf. She's got to get that into her mind."

They caught a glimpse of Ann Gray towards the end of the round. Ann was just starting out with a fair-haired youth whom Culver recalled as one of her companions at the dance at the Palace. He drew Parry's attention to her.

"Look. That's the other girl I was telling you about," he said.

"What, Marie?"

"No. No. Ann Gray. The cheery one I can't place."

Parry gazed curiously across the course at Ann, who was taking a brassy shot from a difficult lie.

"And you think she's in it, too?" he queried, after a moment.

"I hope not. But it's certainly fishy," Culver answered.

Parry chipped his ball on to the green. "Know anything about her?" he asked laconically.

"Nothing more than I told you."

"Well, we shall see," Parry commented, with indifference.

It was this apparent indifference that rather nettled Dick Culver. It was not that he doubted his sincerity, but he could not help feeling that Parry discredited the whole story. He so seldom referred to it.

When they returned to the Blue Boar for lunch, there was a letter waiting for Culver. Mrs. Coke had written a graceful little note, as though to an intimate friend, saying how sorry she was not to have seen him, and begging him to come in to tea that afternoon.

He passed it to Parry.

"She's made the first move," he said.

Parry scanned it superficially.

"You'll go, of course?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to see what she's after."

"Got your lie ready?" Parry asked tersely.

"Lie? What do you mean?"

"To tell her why you're back, and what I'm doing with you. We've been seen, you bet."

"Damn it! I'd forgotten that," Culver admitted ruefully.

Franklin Parry grinned.

"You're a poor sleuth, old man," he said. "That's the first thing she'll want to know." He frowned. "I don't suppose it matters," he added, after a moment's thought. "Put me down as an old pal just back from the Congo. Golf mad. And you brought me down here for a week or two. And if you can insinuate that the lady's charm had something to do with your choice of place, at forty and more, she's apt to swallow it. Flatter her. Middle-aged widows like a bit of attention—at least, that's my experience."

II

It struck Dick Culver at first that Parry's suggestion was rather a feeble one, but he could think of none better. And certainly, if he were to find out anything from Mrs. Coke, he would have to be on friendly terms with her.

Perhaps Parry wasn't such a fool after all. And any-

thing was better than arousing suspicion or hostility in Bill Coke.

Parry had gone back to the golf-course. Golf mad was not altogether a wrong description of him, Culver thought, for the game appeared to occupy his mind far more than the mystery at The Pines.

Culver arrived at the house just before four. Elsa Mayer came to the door, and she greeted him with the most friendly of smiles. There was not the least trace of yesterday's stiffness or embarrassment in her manner.

"Bill won't be long," she said. "She's got a customer, and she said I was to look after you till she came. We're going to have tea in the garden. Shall we go out now?"

He agreed, feeling that it was he who was ill at ease, and he fought hard to appear natural.

Elsa made it easy for him; she talked in quick, jerky little bursts that often finished in a fascinating laugh. He found it almost impossible to believe that this was the sullen-eyed woman he had seen at St. Gules: yet his conviction was unshaken. She had made such a vivid impression upon him at the time, she, Jean's niece, standing dumb under the vituperative tirade of Madelaine.

They found some chairs under a cedar-tree by the side of the tennis lawn.

"Bill was so glad to hear you were back," Elsa said, settling herself with a cigarette. "Are you going to stay for some time?"

But for Parry's warning, the question which came so naturally, would have seemed the most obvious one, but now Culver felt that there was design behind it.

"A week or two," he said. He began to elaborate. "Frankly, I'm not awfully fond of English seaside

places. But I've got an old pal unexpectedly back from Africa, and he's mad on golf. So I thought we might as well come here as anywhere."

"Oh yes. Bill was saying you were at St. Gules."

There was an indefinable something about the way she pronounced the word that struck Culver's ear. Was she a foreigner?

"A place I'm very fond of," he said easily.

"And Bill told me how kind you were to that old waiter. I do think that was nice of you." Her deep voice rang with sympathy.

Culver hoped to heaven he was not betraying his surprise.

"Old Jean? Did you know him?" he asked as casually as he could.

Elsa puckered her forehead.

"I think so," she said, flicking some ash on to the grass. "Bill was trying to recall him to me yesterday. He was at that café where you had drinks after bathing, a surly old man——"

"That's the fellow," Culver broke in. "You know St. Gules well, I suppose?"

He looked up at her innocently, anxious to see if there were any trace of expression on her face that might betray her. But she met his eyes with a smile as innocent.

"I was there with Bill last June for a week. That's the only time. And I hated it. Bill would bathe, and I caught a cold. That makes you hate a place so, don't you think?" Her voice ran off into that queer little laugh.

Culver had to laugh, too. There was something attractive about Elsa Mayer. That beneath this veneer of light inconsequence she was hard and secretive, he knew. But the veneer was very effective, it compelled response.

"I suppose one does. Colds are depressing things."

"Oh! They make my nose red. They make me look almost ugly."

Again she laughed in that odd way of hers. Ann had that same provocative habit, too, he recalled. But Ann was essentially English; the foreigner in this woman was undoubtedly very close to the surface. Her last remark, for example; it asked for a compliment.

He paid it.

"Until I've seen you with a cold, I won't believe it," he said.

Elsa leaned forward and smiled into his face.

"You nice man. I'll never let you see me with a cold. And Bill said you were serious."

"So I am," he protested gallantly. "Never more serious, Miss——"

"Oh, Elsa. We're all Christian names here—to people we like."

"So Ann told me."

"She's a harum-scarum child. Bill adores her, but she nearly drives her frantic at times. Bill works, you know. Ann can't understand being forced to work. That's the best of being rich."

Culver's curiosity was aroused. He had wondered a good deal about Ann.

"Does she live here?" he asked.

Elsa looked surprised.

"Don't you know?" she demanded. "Ann's an heiress. Her father is Sir Theo Gray—the shipping people, you know. She's an only child, and he's worth a million. And he's a conscientious Presbyterian and—I'm afraid Ann isn't," she finished with a quick little lift of the eyebrows that suggested an approving disapproval.

Culver was frankly surprised. He knew of Sir Theo

Gray and his shipping, well. And that made it all the harder to place Ann.

"Then what's she doing here?" he asked blankly.

Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

"Ann's a modern. She can't stand the family. Too many prayer meetings." Elsa's laugh rose to a mocking trill. "She's a real dear, you know, but she must lead her father a devil of a life."

"How?" He was more perplexed than ever.

"She does such silly things. Every time her father smacks her she says she's going to earn her own living. She went as a cook for a month—with some people Bill knew in Town. Bill says she was a good cook, too, but, of course, she got fed up. Then she went as a chauffeur, until she crashed an old dowager's car. But that was funny. She told the old dear she'd buy her a new one just after the smash. Now she wants to go into partnership with Bill."

Culver was intensely interested. Ann was presented in quite a new light.

"What a wild young woman!" he laughed.

He got up to light a match for Elsa, who was just fixing a new cigarette into her holder, and, as he dropped back into his chair, there was an ominous growl behind him.

"What was that?" he asked, turning quickly.

A suspicious-looking Alsatian had appeared as if from the lawn itself. It was standing a few yards away regarding Culver through mysterious, hostile, yellow eyes.

Elsa called out petulantly: "Come, Dirk!" then: "That means Bill's finished with her customer. This is Bill's latest pet. Dirk, speak to the gentleman, he's a friend. Mustn't bite him!"

The big dog lay down at her feet, but showed no sign of friendship.

"By Jove! He looks a man-eater," Culver said. "Dirk, old man. Come, boy!"

But Dirk seemed to reserve judgment, and at that moment Mrs. Coke came slowly on to the lawn.

"Who's calling my darling a man-eater?" she asked lightly. "Mr. Culver, I thought better of you. Dirk, dear, take charge."

She pulled her tight-fitting hat from her head and threw it wearily on to the grass. The dog rose solemnly, and sat down with the jade-green felt between its paws.

"Now he'll eat you if you try to take it away from him," she laughed, dropping into a chair. "Mr. Culver, I'm sick of you, I've been hearing your praises sung for the last ten minutes. You must have a wonderful way with you."

"My praises? Who's been saying this?" Culver asked, in frank surprise.

"Mr. Foster. The funny old parson who's taken Bidely Rectory. We were in the shop and saw you come in. But, of course, you haven't seen the shop yet, have you?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Well, you shall, after tea. I'm positively exhausted. Elsa, dear, do go and tell Ada to hurry."

Elsa nodded, "All right," and wandered off towards the house. Culver turned to Mrs. Coke and demanded more information about the parson.

"Oh, don't make me say it all over again," she laughed. "He's rather a dear, but gossipy!" She made a weary gesture. "I couldn't stop the man."

"But what did he say?" Culver persisted.

"Oh, that you were most intelligent and charming and sympathetic, and understood old churches and appreciated them. And most young men didn't, and what a pity it was. And then that you were charming

again, and did I know you—when you were walking out into my own garden with my own friend. Is that enough?" she rattled off quickly. "But how he tired me!"

She put her head back and closed her eyes as if she really meant it.

"What a queer old bird," Culver commented, not quite sure how much of this was jest. "Do you see much of him—I hope not, for your sake."

Bill opened her eyes slowly, with a mischievous smile.

"I don't mind, really," she said. "He looks like being a good customer. This is the second time he's been, and I've sold him something each time. We met him at the Frazers'—the Flackston rector, you know. Mr. Frazer is looking after Bidely while Mr. Britain's away—or rather his curate is."

A growl from the Alsatian told of the coming of tea, and Elsa reappeared escorting an elderly maidservant with a big silver tray.

III

As tea went on, Culver had to admit himself baffled. These two women, Bill and Elsa, chattered away in the easiest manner in the world.

They took him and his presence in Oldford for granted, and they treated him like an old friend. He found it as absurd to think of Mrs. Coke as the hard, pitiless woman Doreen had depicted, as he did to realise that Elsa Mayer had been standing in the fishing town of St. Gules in peasant dress, and that she was an acquaintance of that fellow Peter, whom he was pretty certain had tried to kill him.

The position was crazy, delirious. The women were consummate actresses, or he was entirely wrong. They

talked of conventional things, knew conventional people; what part could they possibly have in the life of that sordid shop in the Rue Jan Hoeck? And yet, despite it all, he had a sense that they were playing with him, waiting for him to blunder. And he set a guard upon his tongue that made him dull at times, and unresponsive.

They lingered over tea, smoking and talking trivialities until Elsa broke up the party. She glanced at a little, diamond-studded wrist-watch and jumped to her feet.

"Good Lord, Bill! I'd better go and finish packing!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Coke was unperturbed.

"Elsa always takes hours to pack," she said to Culver; "she's been at it on and off since breakfast. Go along, dear; you've only got another two hours."

Elsa made a grimace at Culver, and Mrs. Coke rose lazily.

"Mr. Culver and I will go and look at the shop," she went on. "Don't be afraid, Mr. Culver; I won't make you buy unless you want to."

They drifted back to the house, the disapproving Alsatian at his mistress's heels, and Elsa disappeared upstairs. Mrs. Coke led Culver through a simply furnished dining-room to what had been a more recently built billiard-room, beyond.

"Here's the shop," she said gaily. "What do you think of it? Every mortal thing in it is for sale."

"By Jove, this is fine!" he exclaimed in genuine admiration.

The place was like the most comfortable of halls. There were a few old rugs spread upon the shining parquet floor, a few old pictures hanging from the white walls, a few pieces of rare china and glass in a

delightful Queen Anne cabinet, and, dotted tastefully about, tables and chairs, and an oak chest or two, and there were fresh flowers everywhere. The room looked lived in, and the subtlety of its arrangement was in the absence of overcrowding.

Culver commented on this, and Mrs. Coke smiled appreciatively.

"You're quite right," she said. "There's lots more in the hospital—you know, the studio—but I set the trap with a note of simplicity. It pays. I get all sorts of funny people here. They like coming to a house. I generally ask them to lunch or tea; they like that, too. I'd have asked the dear old bore this afternoon, but I didn't quite feel equal to more of your praises."

Culver was wandering round the room, lost in admiration.

"And you've all that lovely stuff in the studio too," he said.

"Yes. I'm repairing most of that."

"That ripping chest," he went on enthusiastically.

"Where are you going to put that?"

She thought for a moment.

"Oh, the one poor old Jean got for me, you mean. I'm having an awful time with that. It simply won't clean properly. But that won't come here; that goes straight to America, I hope. Poor Jean, I suppose you never heard any more about him?"

Culver looked round sharply. Mrs. Coke was toying with a vase of flowers, arranging them in a different way.

"No," he answered. "I don't suppose I ever shall. I went back to St. Gules, you know, just to settle up his affairs." He eyed her keenly.

She had taken a recalcitrant rose from the vase and was twisting its stem.

"Yes. Ann said you'd gone back." She looked up with a sudden smile. "I was afraid I wasn't going to see you again."

He was suspicious, and ready for her this time.

"But you'd invited me to come and see your—your wonderful possessions," he retorted in a lower, more intimate way. "I came back as soon as I could, you see. And I hope you'll let me come again. I'm staying in Oldford for a while."

"Why, of course." Her pencilled eyebrows raised slowly. She was not displeased, he thought. "Nice people are always welcome here; they are as rare as—as old dower chests."

"And come through the same source," he put in quickly.

She seemed a little confused.

"But won't go the same way, I hope," she smiled. "You mustn't go to America just yet. Come and look at the chest and tell me how you think I'm getting on with it."

Her mood puzzled him. Until he left she talked almost at random, in a nervous, jerky manner unlike her usual calm. But she walked with him to the gate and left him with a smiling insistence that he must come again soon, to tennis, and bring "the golf man from Africa," for Culver had deliberately explained Franklin Parry.

He looked back at the bend in the lane. Mrs. Coke was still leaning idly on her gate, her long cigarette holder in her mouth. She waved to him and turned, and he walked on more intrigued than ever he had been.

But Bill Coke hurried back to the house and up to Elsa Mayer's room.

Elsa snapped out, "Well?" as the door closed. Bill Coke dropped into a chair, frowning. "For God's

sake, Bill, what do you make of him?" Elsa continued irritably. "Does he know me or doesn't he?"

Bill Coke's steel-blue eyes narrowed.

"No. I don't think so," she said after a moment. "I think he's a fool, but a very dangerous fool. The worst kind—the sentimental. What did you get out of him?"

Elsa pushed a half-packed suitcase from the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Very little," she answered. "I don't think he is such a fool. I was afraid to test him. I didn't like the way he introduced Jean. It was too well done. Bill, how much does that man know?"

Mrs. Coke gave a hard, involuntary little sigh.

"I wish I knew," she said with curious emphasis. "And I wish to goodness he'd never come here; he's going to be the most awful nuisance."

"You mean about Carl?"

Mrs. Coke nodded.

"Yes. And the whole business. Elsa, we've got to get rid of him somehow—I don't know how." Her face was lined and intent, and she tapped the carpet nervously with her shoe.

Elsa Mayer, too, looked worried.

"You're quite sure he isn't a fraud?" she asked. She stressed the "quite."

"Oh yes. As far as that goes, I'm quite sure. We've made full inquiries."

"Then why is he hanging about?"

"Oh, don't keep asking that silly question," Mrs. Coke broke out impatiently. "How do I know? I've told you the man's a fool; he'd be easier to deal with if he weren't."

"Well, I don't like it," Elsa returned pettishly. "I believe he knows me. There's something about him. And why did he go to Antwerp——"

"It's a pity he ever left it," Bill snapped out, with a vindictive scowl.

Elsa winced.

"If they hadn't lost their heads there it would have been all right," she said defensively. "I could have dealt with him—then."

"But you weren't there, and he's here, and likely to stick here. He's got some fool of a colonial with him who's golf mad. I must see if Ann can find out what their plans are."

"Yes. Ann might. If she doesn't fall in love with him. She's going to be useful."

"You bet she is," Mrs. Coke said, with a mirthless smile.

"But I don't see how she can help before Carl comes. He may be here at any time now."

"I've tried to stop him. I sent a wire this afternoon—before I came out to the lawn."

Elsa's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Then what about the chest?" she asked.

"You'll have to see to that. That's the infernal nuisance of the whole thing. It means more of this damnable delay."

She rose suddenly and walked across to the window, and there was nothing of the charming, amusing Mrs. Coke about her now. She looked almost wild as she frowned at the garden, biting her lip, her thin, sensitive hands fidgeting with her bag.

"I wish to God people would leave well alone!" she exclaimed peevishly. She turned. "We've got work to do," she went on. "Come on. The car won't be here till half-past seven."

Elsa took a gay overall from the wardrobe and fastened it about her, then followed Bill Coke downstairs to the studio.

CHAPTER VIII

I

A FRIENDLY "Good-afternoon, sir" from Ellis made Culver aware, as he turned into the Blue Boar, that the Rev. Clement Foster's car was waiting outside.

He looked up, surprised out of his thoughts.

"Ah! Afternoon, Ellis," he said. "Mr. Foster here?"

"Yes, sir; he's waiting to see you," the man answered in a pleasant country accent.

Culver hurried on. The parson and Franklin Parry were in the smoking-room, a belated tea-tray before them. The Reverend Clement was talking with animation, punctuating his remarks with a characteristic gesture of the hand, his fingers outspread as though he were trying to grasp the subject of which he spoke.

Parry was slouching back in his chair, listening impassively and puffing, with his usual persistence, at his pipe. He motioned to Culver with a backward nod of the head, and the parson turned, his rubicund face smiling as he blinked at the newcomer.

"An unexpected pleasure," Culver began courteously.

"The pleasure is mine," the parson answered in his smooth voice. "I have met your good friend—Perry, is it?" He glanced at Franklin Parry inquiringly. "Parry. Parry. Yes, yes," he continued at Parry's laconic correction. "And we've been swapping yarns, I think they call it. I know something of the West Coast; I did a short spell of missionary work there, but the climate proved too much."

"Really!" Culver commented, for want of a more intelligent reply.

"I'm afraid I've shocked Mr. Foster with my views on niggers," Parry said, with his slow smile.

"Not shocked," the old man said in a hurt way; "interested. I can understand how trying the life must be. I found it so myself, I fear. But to pleasanter things. Mr. Culver, I looked in to see if you would redeem your promise to-morrow and take lunch with me. And now, of course, I include Mr.—er—Parry, if he would be so kind." He beamed.

Parry lifted himself up on his elbows.

"I've accepted already," he said.

"Of course," Culver put in quickly. "I should be delighted, Mr. Foster."

"How nice! How very nice!" The parson smiled. "A great treat for a lonely man. Now, when shall I send the car for you?"

He seemed pathetically pleased, and stayed on talking for some little time. He had come into Oldford to do an afternoon's shopping, he said. "Seeking some of the creature comforts, you know," he explained, with a deprecatory smile, "and I met an admirer of yours, Mr. Culver."

"I heard you'd been saying very nice things about me," Culver answered, a little embarrassed.

"So you know," the parson laughed. "What a very charming woman. We're talking of Mrs. Coke, Mr. Parry; I don't know if you've met her. But dangerous," he went on; "a menace to one's pocket, I assure you. What did she make you buy, Mr. Culver?"

Again Culver found himself confused. He didn't quite know how to answer. He hedged, with an inconsequent laugh.

"I escaped this time," he said. "I was taken

through the shop—shown the bait, as it were. But she has some very beautiful things.”

“Very beautiful,” the old man said gravely. “A very clever woman Mrs. Coke, though I sometimes wonder if she doesn’t over-repair her treasures. They are so perfect.”

Again the hands went up, with the outstretched fingers groping in the air.

“You don’t mean she fakes?” Culver asked in amazement.

“Oh, dear me, no. Not for a moment. Don’t, please don’t take that impression. What I mean is that with her great knowledge, her great artistry, she may be tempted at times, unintentionally, to do too much. To gild the lily. I tell her so. And she replies by making me buy something I had no intention of buying.” He chuckled softly, like a naughty schoolboy.

But the seed was sown in Culver’s ready mind, though he answered with a grin: “A most apt revenge, too, sir.”

There was something very unusual about Bill Coke’s business. That scrapheap of fine old furniture in the studio, and those very perfect specimens in the shop, as she called it. Furniture faking was a paying job. Had the old man deliberately been giving him a tip?

Parry drawled: “I must meet this fascinating young woman, Mr. Foster—even if I have to buy something.”

The old man chuckled again.

“You tell her she’s a young woman, and you’ll be liked, Mr. Parry. Mrs. Coke is at an age when that would be very welcome hearing. But she has charm, undeniable charm.” He drew an old-fashioned gold hunter from his maple waistcoat. “Dear, dear,” he

said, "but I must be going. Till to-morrow, then. Let us hope St. Nicholas at Bidely will charm your friend as it charmed you, Mr. Culver."

Culver went with him to the car and came back to Parry, who was just ordering a whisky-and-soda.

"Where'd you pick up that old bird?" he asked with amusement.

Culver told him.

"Gossipy old boy," Parry commented dryly. "Make a hit at an old maid's tea-fight, I should think. Well, old man, you got any startling news?"

II

Culver had never known Franklin Parry in better spirits than he was that evening. He ordered a bottle of champagne at dinner and followed it with a second before they were halfway through. He grew talkative for the first time. He was enthusiastic about East Coast air.

"By Gad! old man, after months of African forest, you don't know what it means to me," he said, as they lingered over their meal. "It's as good as this stuff and better." He filled Culver's glass again.

Mildly amused, Culver noted that "this stuff" was having its effect. Men who lived the life that Parry did were apt to break out now and then, but Parry was holding his liquor well. It mellowed him. He told grim stories of the Congo, interspersed with funny, little, inconsequent recollections of the Rev. Clement Foster's visit.

The parson seemed to have amused him vastly.

"It's going to be a hell of a lunch to-morrow," he said, with his solemn smile. "That's why I said I'd go. A missionary! He talked like it. I've seen 'em.

But honest, old man, you'll have to do the talking about architecture; that's not my strong suit."

Culver laughed. He, too, was feeling very tolerant.

"Don't you worry," he said. "Just say everything's wonderful; that'll please the old man."

Parry went off at random to Culver's story of his visit to The Pines.

"So you drew blank, did you?" he asked. "Where was the other girl—the kid—Ann something. They didn't parade her?"

"No, they hardly mentioned her except to tell me who she was. I told you, you remember."

"Yes. Funny business that. Sort of young woman who's likely to get into trouble, I should say."

Culver became more serious.

"I can see her being attracted by Mrs. Coke," he said, "but I don't like the idea of her palling up with that woman Elsa—Marie otherwise. She's a bad egg, that woman. Clever as you make 'em, too."

They discussed Elsa and Mrs. Coke for some time, but Parry would never keep to the point for more than a few moments. He was inclined to repeat himself, and ask questions about details he already knew. And though wine did not easily affect Culver, he was feeling his dinner, and not very anxious to be too serious.

He was vaguely hopeful and just as glad when Parry dropped the subject.

They had a cognac with their coffee in the smoking-room, and Parry suggested a walk. But he did not get far. Less than a hundred yards from the hotel he stopped.

"Old man," he said a little thickly, "I'm afraid I've overstepped the mark. What with the air and the dinner, I think I'll be wiser to seek my little cot." He laughed stupidly.

Culver had been expecting this, and he was worried.

"Right you are," he agreed quickly; "you know best. I'll come back with you."

Parry became really truculent.

"You will not," he said.

"Just to the door," Culver urged.

"Not to the door; not a yard towards the door. I know how to look after myself. Go for your walk. You need it. Get on, my boy. I'm going back."

Dick Culver knew enough not to insist, though unobtrusively he watched his companion until he was safely into the hotel. Then he set out for the sea front. He had dined well, he admitted; a little too well. An hour's hard walk would do him all the good in the world. Funny chap, Parry, he mused. He hoped this wasn't a real failing of his. He must be more careful in future; check him if he could.

But Franklin Parry at about that moment was talking to the night porter at the Blue Boar. There was no trace of his good dinner about him, his speech was clear, and his manner alert.

"There'll be a trunk call coming through for me in a few minutes," he said definitely. "I'll be in that corner. Let me know at once."

CHAPTER IX

I

OLDFORD is on a branch line. To save the change at Eckenham Junction, Ann drove Elsa the ten miles direct to that station.

She drove at a breakneck speed, cheerily ignoring her companion's many pleas to be more careful.

"My dear, I'm always safest over forty, and I can pull her up in a second—see," she retorted.

She crammed on her brakes and brought the car up with a suddenness that drew a scream of alarm from Elsa Mayer. But the next moment they were rushing on again across the open heath roads, Ann thoroughly enjoying the joke, and Elsa pale, and distinctly nervous.

Ann did not trouble to get out at the station.

"You'll be all right now, won't you?" she announced, rather than demanded. "You've got plenty of time."

Elsa glanced at the clock.

"Quite enough," she said with an odd smile.

"Then I'll crawl off; I want to be back before dark. Good luck, Elsa, I'll hear through Bill how you get on," and almost before the porter had unstrapped the luggage from the carrier Ann was off again.

Elsa was going to Town, then on to Devon, to spend a few weeks with friends, so Oldford had been told. But her luggage was only labelled to Ipswich, and there she left the London train.

She had the best part of an hour to wait before the through train from the North to Harwich arrived. Elsa spent the time restlessly wandering about the far

end of the platform, and she gave a sigh of relief when at last she was seated in a compartment near the engine.

Elsa Mayer in travelling costume was not the smart Elsa of The Pines; there was something almost dowdy about her loose, drab raincoat, and somehow she managed to accentuate that dowdiness during the journey. When she left the train at Parkeston Quay she looked a typical middle-class Belgian.

There was still some time before the London train was due, and Elsa saw her two suitcases on board the Antwerp boat, then wandered towards the hotel.

The light was baffling under the glaring arcs of the quay, and out of the darkness a man slipped unobtrusively to her side. She started as she saw him, but did not check her pace. He fell in with her step as though they were travelling together, and they strolled a little away from the gangways, and stood by the dockside, looking at the boat.

"When did you get here?" she asked sharply, through the roar of the funnels.

"This morning. I've been hanging about all day waiting to get the stuff cleared."

"Do they know you are here?" Elsa's dark eyes turned on him in anxious inquiry. "They didn't when I left about seven."

"They do now," he laughed, lighting a cigarette. "I was on the telephone to Bill an hour ago. She told me to look out for you. What's up? She was very funny; she wouldn't say much—said you'd explain. What's she fretting about? The stuff's through safe enough."

"It isn't that, Carl, it's that man Culver. He's at Oldford, and they're afraid he'll recognise you. I'm pretty sure he's suspicious of me."

The man whistled softly.

"That's awkward. Who the devil is he, Elsa? He isn't——"

"No, he's perfectly all right—or Bill says so. She's made inquiries. It's only through that letter of Jean's. Of course that fool would die just now—and drag the man into it." Elsa's face darkened.

"But what was it all about, the letter? Was he mad? Did he tell anything?" Carl Mingay looked up quickly. "I don't understand——"

"Nor do I," Elsa said with a sullen frown. "Bill's a damned sight too secretive. She doesn't tell too much."

A line of trucks creaked slowly along the quay behind them, and stopped with a succession of harsh crashes as each waggon slammed into the buffers of the next. A yard or so away a clattering crane emitted clouds of steam, dazzling white in the fierce electric light, as its chain clanked up and down with luggage for the outgoing boat.

Mingay turned up the collar of his coat; the breeze off the water was cool.

"But what was the letter about?" he persisted.

"Bill said to say that he was ill, and couldn't do any more jobs," Elsa answered with a sceptical sniff. "But I never saw the letter. She made me fake up some silly note in a hurry to show Culver. She was scared, Carl; I've never seen her lose her nerve before. You don't think Jean would have gone back on us?"

"Jean? No. The drunken beast! He'd too much to lose. But it's queer, Elsa, damned queer. You know Culver had an accident in Antwerp, don't you?" Mingay looked up again in that sharp, furtive manner.

Elsa's head swung round, and she stared at him resentfully.

"Bill said something about it. Had you got anything to do with that, Carl?"

He laughed callously.

"I? Good Lord, no. What makes you think that? It was some dock-side toughs, I suppose, but it might have saved a lot of trouble if——"

Elsa turned on him like a fury.

"Look here, Carl, none of that," she said. Her voice was low, and husky. "If I thought you had anything to do with it, by God! I'd get out to-morrow."

"Well, I didn't, so don't get excited," he said curtly. "Come on, we'd better walk."

They ambled slowly back towards the station, where porters were already lining up in readiness for the London train. And as they paraded slowly up and down the platform, as if waiting for friends, they talked earnestly.

Elsa was insistent that Carl should not go to Oldford.

"Bill will be wild if you do," she said. "She wired you to-day not to."

But he only laughed in a superior self-confident manner.

"That's all very fine," he retorted, "but I want to know a bit more about Culver and the letter. Bill doesn't put me off that way. And besides, I've got something else for her. Bill isn't almighty though she thinks she is. Don't you worry, Elsa, I'm as fond of my own skin as anybody."

The boat train came slowly in, and the platform leapt to life as the passengers streamed out of the carriages. In the bustle, with the slightest of nods to Mingay, Elsa drifted away towards the boat. They parted as they had met. But Carl Mingay strolled slowly to the hotel and made his way to the office.

To the porter on duty he said with a friendly nod :

"I shall have to get away early to-morrow; better

call me at six sharp. And I want to make another trunk call to Oldford—my friend hasn't arrived."

II

Captain Carl Mingay was a good-looking man in a theatrical way. His dark hair was sleek and carefully brushed. When he smiled he showed two rows of very white teeth, and, as if conscious of this, his smile was rather forced. Indeed, his whole manner was one of professional good humour which passed well enough. Few people ever noticed that his dark eyes seldom smiled. They appeared to display a certain sullen watchfulness.

He tipped well, and servants liked him, for he was ever ready to turn any subject into a joke, however trivial that joke might be. And the porter at Oldford Station, who came to open the carriage door for him, sensed his man, and hurried to call a cab, although there was no luggage for him to carry. He knew he would get his tip.

Mingay had chosen the luncheon hour to arrive at Oldford. He drove straight to The Pines, and sent in a card to Mrs. Coke, which read: "Captain Carl Mingay," and at the bottom in Gothic lettering, "Mingay and Burns. Fine Art Dealers. London and Paris."

Bill was sitting over a dish of scrambled eggs in the studio when the card was brought to her. She glanced at it and her lips tightened.

"Take him up to the office," she said to the elderly maid, "I'll be there shortly."

Mrs. Coke's office was on the first floor, a little room designed as a dressing-room. It was a business-like place, with a filing cabinet and a big roll-top desk littered with papers. Mingay was gazing from

the window when she entered. He turned with his mechanical smile, and laughed :

"Hallo, Bill, I've come after all, you see."

Mrs. Coke's greeting was frigid; she shut the door carefully, and sat down with deliberation at her desk.

"Didn't you see Elsa?" she asked briefly.

"Yes. That's why I came."

"Then you're a fool," Bill snapped impatiently.

"Carl, do you want to get us all into trouble?"

"Bill, don't get hysterical," he said, still with that fixed smile. "What's the idea? How can we do business if I don't come here?"

Mrs. Coke groped for a cigarette and fixed it into her long holder.

"Haven't you any sense at all?" she asked fretfully. "With this man Culver here—if he sees you——"

"Oh, get the Culver complex off your mind. He won't see me. And if he did——" He threw out his hands as if rather proud of his appearance. "Would he recognise me? Don't be silly. What's come over you, Bill? Elsa said you were losing your nerve."

Mrs. Coke winced, and glared sulkily at her desk, fingering a sheaf of papers nervously.

"You see I can't—run away—quite as easily as you and Elsa can," she answered sarcastically.

"And your nerves in Antwerp are responsible for all the trouble. God! but what a fool you made of yourself over that. Were you sober?"

It was his turn to grow resentful. The smile stripped from his face, and the furtive, suspicious eyes of Peter of the Rue Jan Hoeck glared sullenly.

"Oh, hell about that," he sneered. "How was I to know who the man was? And who is he, anyhow?"

"A writer. A journalist. He's perfectly all right

—or he would be if you kept away. We can deal with him.” Bill was petulant.

“That’s all very well,” Mingay said, and there was a sly, insincerity in his voice. “But what I want to know is, why did Jean send him?”

Mrs. Coke pushed back her chair an inch or two and drummed on the table, then she broke into a hard laugh.

“The poor imbecile must have been drinking for days, I should think,” she answered. “He wrote me a madman’s letter—he had delusions. He said people were after him, and he wasn’t going to do any more jobs. He said it was all our fault that he was ill. Oh, mad as a hatter!”

She dismissed the subject with a bored gesture, and went on quickly: “Since you are here, what about the stuff?”

He eyed her keenly as if debating whether or not to drop the question of Jean. Then, making his decision, the set smile reappeared on his face.

“That’s all right, Bill,” he answered. “It’s going to Ipswich for the carrier to collect as usual. That’s the last of that stunt, isn’t it?”

She nodded, and the lines in her face relaxed.

“I suppose you know when you’re going to get your money back,” he went on with a grin, “but I’d rather stick to the old lines myself. What do you think of this, Bill?”

His hand slid into a hip pocket, and he pulled out a package which he undid casually. Bill was alert and appraising as he removed the paper, and her strange eyes lighted with real admiration as they fell upon a perfect, eighteenth century miniature set in a jewelled frame.

Then she glanced up at him searchingly.

“That’s Lowenstein’s ‘Marquise de Granville.’

You can't sell that, Carl; it's reported everywhere," she said.

"That's why I got it cheap," he answered steadily. "Think what the stones are worth, Bill. You can always get rid of them."

Bill Coke pushed the miniature from her with obvious indifference. Her face was set, unreadable as a poker player's.

"No good, Carl," she said, with a shake of the head. "It would take years to get rid of, and not a very wise thing to keep about the house either." She allowed herself the faintest of laughs.

Mingay's smile seemed glued to his face. It was mirthless; suggestive of some grinning gargoyle.

"Righto, Bill," he answered, stretching out his hand. "There are others that aren't so particular. I didn't want to break it up; I thought it was in your line."

"It is, it is," she agreed dispassionately. "But it's too dangerous. Much too dangerous. If I were you I'd get rid of it quick. Lowenstein's employed Pringles; he's not trusting the official police."

Mingay's smile faded.

"How do you know that?" he asked quickly.

Bill Coke's voice was bored.

"I just know," she said in a matter-of-fact way. For a second her eyes shifted to his face, then swung back to her desk.

He returned the miniature to his pocket and asked for a cigarette.

"Well, I'll take my chance," he said, with a forced laugh. "I'd have let you have it for fifty, but I'll get double that the other side."

"You'll be lucky," she murmured as though she were thinking aloud.

He scowled, then burst out in a blustering way:

"I'll get it all right. Don't you worry. What's the matter with you?"

"Then get it!" she exclaimed impatiently. "And I'll be just as glad when you are the other side, with that thing on you."

"Where's Friend?" he asked with apparent irrelevance.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"New York—the last time I heard."

"He'd buy it—and be glad to get it."

"Maybe. Better go to America and ask him. That's the only place you'd get a price for it." She got up suddenly. "Well, Carl, I've got work to do."

"Half a minute, Bill," Mingay protested. "There's something to come for the fake stuff I brought over."

"When it's delivered," she said without concern.

"But you won't let me wait for that. It's a bit thick."

"Sorry, but you know the terms." Mrs. Coke was hard, almost inhuman, in the utter finality of her refusal.

"I must have a bit to go on with," he persisted. "I'm broke, Bill. Clearing out of Antwerp and all that. After all, it's partly your fault."

Bill's voice rose to a harsh note as she knocked the ash from her cigarette.

"Really, Carl, that's too funny. You made a complete fool of yourself, and now you try to blame me."

"I think there's something behind this letter business," he replied truculently. "So does Elsa. Don't you try any games now, Bill."

Mrs. Coke looked up, her hand still extended over the ash-tray. There was a curious immobility about her face.

"Carl," she said, as if she were announcing the

most trivial of facts. "We know exactly where we stand, you and I. We know exactly what would happen if I have you struck off the list." She might have been asking his opinion upon some quite unimportant matter.

His mechanical smile came back hurriedly.

"No need to get nasty about it," he said in a conciliatory voice. "I've got to look after myself just as much as you have."

"So you come down here in broad daylight, where you're likely to be seen. You've a funny way of looking after yourself, Carl."

He grew uneasy under her accusing gaze.

"I had to," he remonstrated sulkily. "I want some money. Look here, Bill; what will you give?" His hand slid back to his hip pocket.

She shook her head.

"Too risky, too risky altogether," she said. "It's much too well known."

"Oh, come on," he tried to persuade her. "You know you could get three hundred for it. You've got ways. I bet you could get it to Friend inside a month if you wanted to."

"No," she replied apathetically.

"You can have it for forty."

She hesitated.

"I'll give you thirty, and I'm a fool to do it," she said.

He threw it across to her.

"You're a hard nut, Bill. Take it. It's me that's the fool, not you." He gave a soured, disgusted chuckle.

CHAPTER X

I

DICK CULVER woke late that morning. There was only a slightly gummy mouth to remind him of the indiscretion of the night before, but he was surprised when he looked at his watch. It was long after nine. He had been late in getting to bed. It was nearly midnight when a sleepy porter had let him in, and he must have walked six or seven miles after Parry had left him.

Culver recalled the incident with a shame-faced grin and hurried his dressing. He wondered what Parry would have to say about it, and whether he would have a fat head. Parry had been really tight, there was no doubt about that.

There was a note from him waiting at the office. Parry had scrawled: "What *did* we do last night? I feel like the devil, and I'm off for a spot of air and exercise. You'll probably find me loafing on the beach. No golf to-day; I couldn't hit a football. And thank God the old parson bird has put us off. He sent his chauffeur round soon after eight to say his heart had gone back on him. We're to go to-morrow if he's better. I'm glad.—F. P."

Culver was glad too; he didn't feel quite up to the strain of that lunch.

"What time did Mr. Parry come down?" he asked the waiter casually.

"Early, sir, early," the man answered, as though Parry had confided his condition in him. "He was down before eight and out soon after. Said he wasn't feeling very well, sir."

Culver nodded and continued to attack his bacon.

He was rather lazy, and he lingered over the papers before he wandered out on to the beach. It was a glorious day, and the shingle was crowded, as was the surf, with many bathers. Culver ambled along looking for Parry, but couldn't find him. Then somebody threw a stone at him, and he turned to see Ann Gray.

She was enveloped in a giddy bath-wrap, sun-basking after her swim. As usual, she was surrounded by a group of friends.

Culver went over to her. She looked particularly jolly this morning, he thought, with her unruly short hair drying in the sun, and her clear skin burning to yet a deeper tan.

"Hullo," she drawled. "You look a bit pink-eyed. What have you been up to?"

He assured her that he had been up to nothing.

"Well, you look it," she said frankly. "Come and sit down." She made a place for him and introduced him cursorily to the group.

They talked on for a time, till one by one the others departed. But Ann showed no sign of moving. She lolled back on the warm stones, smoking Culver's cigarettes and chatting of the trivial gossip of the place—the tennis tournament, the coming regatta, and the dances at the Palace. She made only the most fleeting of references to Mrs. Coke and Elsa.

But she explained one thing that interested him. He had asked, naturally enough, with whom she was staying at the Palace, and she had laughed lazily :

"Not a soul. I'm all alone. Does that shock you, Richard Culver?" The mocking way in which she always spoke his name both pleased and irritated him. "You look a bit Victorian, like some of the old ducks at the hotel. They don't think I'm quite nice. But I am really."

"But surely——" he began.

"Now, don't you start lecturing me," she interrupted. "I get quite enough of that at home. I know the tone of voice." She laughed again. "Ever had measles?"

He looked at her blankly.

"Measles?" he echoed.

"Yes. The spotty things. You know."

"I—I suppose so," he said foolishly.

"I haven't, and I didn't want 'em. That's why I'm here." She leaned upon an elbow and watched his bewildered face with mock seriousness.

Culver was conscious once more of the poor figure he cut with this extraordinary girl. She had a devastating faculty of making him appear a callow youth.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he asked, trying hard to seem unperturbed.

"Measles," she answered solemnly. "Beth's measles. I suppose they were Jimmie's really."

"Ann, don't be an idiot," he broke out, hardly realising what he said.

A smile of real amusement came gradually to her sunburned face.

"That's much better," she drawled. "Richard is becoming almost human. It's quite true, my dear, Beth had measles, and she caught them from Jimmie. Beth's my married cousin. I live with her in London most of the time. And Jimmie's her boy. We were all coming down here till they got measly. So I had to come alone. It's quite true. Beth will be here herself, in about a fortnight, to prove it. She's at home now, getting disinfected. Now is our curiosity satisfied?"

There was something in her teasing manner that broke down his self-consciousness.

"You are a ridiculous child," he retorted. "Do you behave like this with everybody?"

"Not everybody," she said gravely. "I'm only serious with serious people."

He grew daring. The girl attracted him enormously. For the moment he entirely disassociated her from Mrs. Coke and Elsa and all the mystery that they stood for in his mind.

"Come and have tea somewhere this afternoon?" he asked.

She nodded, without a moment's hesitation. "Let's go to Salthithe. I'll drive you over. It's a simply gorgeous place with an adorable castle full of dungeons and things—all rats and ghosts. It makes me frightened; I love being frightened. It's too thrilling."

"Splendid!" he said. "May I call for you about three?"

"Yes, I'll be ready."

He helped her to her feet, and they walked back to the hotel. And for the first time since he had been in the town Dick Culver felt that Oldford was a really cheery place.

II

Franklin Parry had not returned when lunch started, and Culver went in alone. It was only after he had left Ann that he began to wonder how Parry would receive the news that he was going to spend the afternoon with her.

He felt awkward about it, sensitive in a way. He hoped Parry would not make cynical jokes. After all, Parry had deserted him all the morning; he couldn't be expected to hang about the whole day waiting for him.

Lunch finished, and still there was no sign of Parry. Culver was more relieved than curious about his companion's absence. He had probably gone for a long

tramp and was lunching at some country inn. He would leave him a note, say he'd be back to dinner, and leave explanations until then.

He wrote a non-committal letter and left the Blue Boar soon after two. But killing time was a dreary occupation, and Culver found himself at the Palace Hotel ten minutes before he was due. He strolled into the lounge from the beach side, determined to hang about there till three o'clock. But Ann was there already.

She was standing on the far side of the room, talking to a tall, dark man in tweeds. She caught sight of Culver, gave a curt "Good-bye" to her companion, and hurried towards him.

"Bright lad," she said in an undertone. "You've saved me from the world's worst bore. Let's go and get the car."

She hustled him out through the door by which he had entered while he asked vague questions about the bore.

Ann explained in her usual exaggerated manner.

"But who is he?" Culver asked in amusement.

They were in the car and starting off. Ann accelerated and the two-seater jumped forward.

"I daren't tell you," she laughed. "I once mistook you for him. It's Elsa's pal, Captain Mingay."

Ann described him unflatteringly as they wound their way through the little town and out into the broad heath country beyond.

"I suppose it's shell-shock, poor dear," she summed him up in the end, with the speedometer needle quivering in the forties. "But that doesn't make it any easier for Elsa."

Mingay, it appeared from Ann's story, was "simply dotty" about Elsa Mayer. "He follows her all over the place," she said indignantly. "I bet he

goes down to Devonshire now, after her." She slowed up for a flock of sheep pattering along the road.

Culver learned that Mingay was a picture dealer. "Not that he's any good at it, Bill says," Ann announced. "He's always trying to sell her duds and swearing they're by Rubens or somebody. That's the worst of these amateurs."

"And who's Elsa?" Culver asked curiously.

"Oh, Elsa's an artist like Bill. But she works for Bill's shop in her spare time—picks up things for her, and got a *flair* for it too, Bill says." Ann's admiration for Mrs. Coke was obviously very real. What Bill said was gospel to her.

They turned from the main road into a sandy lane that runs across Hithe Heath.

"I think we can get through this way," Ann laughed as the car jolted over the ruts, "but we'll probably get lost."

"I don't mind," he said with sincerity, for he was enjoying every moment of this drive.

Ann went on to talk about Mrs. Coke. "The pluckiest woman I know," she described her, and Culver frowned as a memory of the Palmerston in Chelsea, and Doreen's bitter words, came to his mind. "I want to go into partnership with her, but she won't let me. Bill thinks I wouldn't work. Rot! I believe in earning my own living."

A lonely, weathered signpost by the wayside pointed: "Pryke 1½ miles."

"Oh, Pryke! A heavenly spot! Ever been there?" Ann asked abruptly.

He shook his head.

"We'll go," she announced, and swung the car round sharply. And they never reached Salthithe that afternoon.

Pryke is just a cluster of cottages set in a purple common. The road to it meanders on through the

heather till it ends in a track that runs down to the edge of a tidal river. A great tan-sailed barge drifted by as they came to the place, and gulls were hovering round it, tumbling splashes of purest white in a sapphire sky.

"Don't you think this is topping?" Ann drawled proudly. Then, almost in the same breath: "Damn! Now we've done it. And there's no spare wheel." For the off back tyre chose that moment to burst with a report that sent a cloud of gulls scurrying up from the flats, wheeling excitedly as they rose.

But Culver only laughed. He could conceive no pleasanter place in which to be marooned with such a companion on so perfect an afternoon.

"Cheer up, Ann," he said. "I think it's very thoughtful of the thing to wait till now. We'll job a barge and sail home if needs be. Let's go and look at the water."

III

They idled two lazy hours away on a strip of sand that runs down from the heather and bracken of the common to the edge of the tide, and Culver, at any rate, noted regretfully the return of the lad they had sent on a bicycle into Oldford to fetch a new tyre.

They had tea in the garden of an odd, little, red-bricked cottage—a real farm-house tea, with jam, and lettuces and radishes pulled fresh from the earth—and watched the placid tide ebbing slowly and the wild fowl flitting lightly from flat to flat as it uncovered.

Ann had puzzled Culver during the afternoon. She was a contradiction. She would speak of work and the fun of work in a dreamy, serious way, then, in a flash, change to some slow, mocking comment: "But I bet I wouldn't find it quite so funny if I had to do it," she said once.

She spoke little of her home, save to admit: "Father's Theo Gray. We're ships you know," and to break into a bitter, little outburst about the dreariness of her parent's life.

Ann struck him as an extraordinary mixture. There was a strong streak of that same love of work in her which had made her father's fortune, but at the same time there was a craving for novelty and excitement, a passion for speed and new experience with no thought or care of possible consequences.

Her confidences invited his, and he told her of his luck that had made him independent for the time being.

"You'll go straight to the devil, I can see that," she said, not all in raillery, he thought. "Money's going to spoil you; you're lazy. You'd better go and shift that tyre and do a real job of work for once."

While he sweated with the wheel, she sat by the roadside gibing at him, vowing she could do it infinitely quicker herself. Which was true, for Dick Culver was not hurrying.

"And so you thought you'd go travelling for a bit," she said in her inconsequent, irrelevant way. "And be a nice, idle lounge lizard. Aren't you sorry you didn't?"

"Not a bit," he said cheerfully, rubbing his greasy hands on the springy turf.

"Why didn't you?" she asked with challenge. "What on earth made you come back here? I don't believe that story of the Congo person."

He hesitated for a moment. Her question ruffled his complete contentment; it brought back disturbing thoughts. And as much to dispel those thoughts as for any other reason, he took up her challenge.

"Because you suggested I should," he said blandly.

"You are rotten as a liar," she answered quickly, but he thought she was not altogether displeased.

They drove home slowly, for Ann vowed the tyre wasn't safe, and that she daren't let the car out.

When he left her at the hotel he reminded her:

"I've still got that promise of yours to come to Salthithe. We haven't been there yet."

"Some time, if you're good," she laughed. "You're improving. I'll give you quite a good character to Bill to-night; she's having dinner with me. Bye-bye, Richard."

Culver was thoughtful as he wandered back to the Blue Boar. This obsession of Ann for Mrs. Coke worried him. There was something wrong about it. Bill Coke, the mysterious, the secretive, the woman with some very dark chapters in her past, was not a desirable companion for a headstrong girl like Ann. Yet what business was it of his?

Franklin Parry's even voice broke in upon his musing. Parry was lounging in the doorway of the hotel, smoking his inevitable calabash. He had changed already, and he grinned knowingly at Culver as he greeted him.

"So you've had a pleasant afternoon, I reckon," he said.

"What? Yes. Yes. You saw me come by, I suppose." Culver was curiously embarrassed.

"And saw you go, old man. I fetched up here just after you'd left."

"Well, what happened to you?" Culver asked, anxious to turn the conversation.

"I just walked myself fit again and got lost. I really mustn't do it, Culver, at my age." He smiled reminiscently. "But it was a damned good dinner, wasn't it? What about a spot before you go up and shift?"

CHAPTER XI

I

FRANKLIN PARRY was getting, just a little, on Dick Culver's nerves. He seemed futile in a way. He had no suggestions to offer about Mrs. Coke; indeed, whenever her name was mentioned, he appeared deliberately to dismiss it with some fatuous remark like: "Don't rush it, old man. Wait a bit."

Culver felt, too, that he hampered him. He would like to have tried to see Ann again the next morning, but Parry wanted to play golf.

The tentative luncheon engagement with the Rev. Clement Foster was cancelled. The parson had written a courteous, old-fashioned note of apology saying that, although he was better, he was not yet fit to play the host in a worthy manner. Culver was sorry for the old man and inclined to be resentful of Parry's undisguised relief at the postponement of the lunch. A strain of stubbornness in him made him suggest that it would be a polite action to walk out to Bidely that afternoon and make a formal inquiry after the parson's condition.

Not that he cared very much; it was more a gesture of protest against Franklin Parry's attitude and a means of escape from another round of golf.

Parry agreed, in his impassive way.

"Not a bad idea," he said without argument. "Then I can say I've seen his church."

That fretted Culver more, and he wished he had never made the suggestion. But there was no way out of it.

It was a dreary walk. For half a mile on end the two men would not exchange a word. Culver's ill-temper smouldered resentfully. He knew it was un-

justified, and that made him the more sullen and fretful. From sidelong glances at Parry, it appeared that he was quite unconscious of his companion's mood. His face betrayed no feeling as he puffed mechanically at his pipe. Culver hated that pipe, it looked so much like its owner, he thought irritably; long and expressionless and sallow. He wanted to snatch the pipe from that straight mouth and scream, "For heaven's sake, say something, man," though he knew that whatever Parry might say would only exasperate more.

To make matters worse, Culver missed the way, though torture would not have made him admit it. The church was in sight, in its clump of trees, and he struck deliberately cross-country for it.

"Rough going," he growled. "Hope you don't mind."

"Not a bit," Parry answered serenely without checking his stride. "Good country this; I like it."

Culver swore to himself. The sky had clouded, and it was sticky and moist. The midges were troublesome, too; they buzzed in a swarm about Culver's perspiring face, neglecting Parry entirely.

They tramped on in taciturn gloom.

But Dick Culver was feeling ashamed of himself, and he made an effort, just before they reached the rectory. He tried to speak in a more natural manner.

"I don't know how we get in from this side," he said, breaking the silence. "I fetched up the other way last time."

"I expect there's a gate," Parry announced with assurance.

Culver continued:

"Look here, Parry, I'm afraid I've been rotten company. I've rather got the hump to-day; I'm sorry," he blurted out.

Parry looked round in surprise.

"Hump, old man? I hadn't noticed it. That's all right," he said. "I'm no chatterbox myself."

II

They had reached the garden wall, of old lichen-grown bricks, that rose straight from the heath itself. A wooden gate opened when they tried it, and they found themselves on the lawn.

"Front door's on the other side," Culver said. "We'd better go round. The old bird mayn't like us taking liberties."

"Right you are." Parry maintained his imperturbable calm.

Culver was a little uneasy about this unconventional method of approach, and he rather hurried as they made for the corner of the house, feeling a trespasser and hoping the parson wouldn't discover him.

He turned the corner swiftly, and came upon an open French window. From the room came a sound of conversation, and there was no going back now. He gave a nervous cough, to announce his presence, and walked on. But his eyes turned instinctively to the room.

The Rev. Clement Foster was seated at a table in the window examining something through a watchmaker's magnifying glass, fixed in his eye. Culver had a glimpse of a miniature in a jewelled frame.

Standing immediately behind the parson was Mrs. Coke, and he saw the alarm that spread over her face as she caught sight of him. Then the old man looked up, startled, the glass dropping from his eye; and there came a savage growl from the room and a sharp cry from Mrs. Coke as a wild-eyed Alsatian sprang forward, straight at Culver.

The beast sprang short, and a stupendous clatter followed.

In that detached moment, which comes in times of

crisis, before the brain has time to register any emotion of fear, Culver saw exactly what had happened.

The Alsatian's chain lead had attached itself to a chair; that chair came forward under the impetus of the spring, fouled the table from which the parson was rising in alarm, brought it down with a crash, and pulled the snarling dog up short.

Mrs. Coke's voice cried harshly :

"Dirk! Dirk! Come here, you devil."

Parry had jumped forward and had twisted the crook of his stout ash stick deftly through the dog's collar, holding him at bay. The parson was stooping as though more concerned in the fall of the table than in anything else.

Culver took in the whole scene with its vivid unreality. His attention fixed dumbly on the miniature the old man had been examining. It had flung forward a little, and was lying face upward not a yard from him.

Parry was the first to speak.

"It's all right. I can hold him if you can untangle the chain," he said, with no trace of excitement.

Mrs. Coke came towards him, pale, and with a stupid smile on her face.

"Let me take him," she said. She passed in front of Culver and deliberately kicked the fallen picture into the room, then, quite fearlessly, seized the collar of the frightened, menacing dog, and hit it as hard as she could. It yelped, and she struck it again.

Culver bent down to do what Parry had asked Mrs. Coke to do—clear the lead. It had been purposely looped around the chair leg, he found, but he got it free.

Parry took it from him.

"Better tie him up somewhere till he settles down," he suggested.

The old parson spoke for the first time.

"There is a wood shed by the kitchen door; perhaps if you would help Mrs. Coke——" he said vaguely, with a helpless gesture of his outspread hands.

Culver went ahead to open the door, and Mrs. Coke and Parry followed with the growling dog.

Mrs. Coke was talking more easily now.

"I am so sorry, so dreadfully sorry," Culver heard her saying. "I've never known Dirk do this before. He was frightened. I do hope he didn't touch you, Mr. Culver."

Parry sounded quite cheerful as he broke in before Culver could reply :

"The furniture suffered, I think, that's all."

Culver was worried, but he tried to make light of the incident.

"I did call him a man-eater, didn't I, Mrs. Coke?" he said.

The resisting hound was pushed into the shed.

"You will see that the door is safe, won't you?" Mrs. Coke pleaded. "Poor Mr. Foster, whatever will he think of me! And that lovely vase." The strain being over, she seemed suddenly to have lost her nerve, and she hurried ahead of them back to the house.

Parry assured himself that the dog was safe.

"Is this the mysterious lady?" he asked in an undertone.

Culver nodded.

"Rather a stormy introduction," Parry went on, "and not very good for a man with a heart."

"By Jove! no," Culver agreed. "I say, I hope the old boy's all right."

They went back to the room. The table had been put to rights again, and Mrs. Coke was on her knees gathering up fragments of broken china. She was

apologising with nervous volubility. In fact, Culver imagined she was on the verge of tears.

"How can I forgive myself?" she repeated. "Really, Mr. Foster, I do assure you that in all the months I've had Dirk he's never behaved like this."

Culver recalled Elsa Mayer's statement that Dirk was Bill's latest pet, and that, too, perplexed him.

Clement Foster was trying to make light of it all.

"My dear lady, please don't think any more about it. So long as nobody was hurt, what does it matter? Ah, now do come and help me," he went on, as Culver and Parry arrived. "Poor Mrs. Coke is making a dreadful fuss about nothing. A broken vase—that's all—and a few scratches to Mr. Britain's furniture which your clever hands, Mrs. Coke, I know will soon put right. What do you think, Mr. Parry, you have a wide experience of the world?" He beamed genially.

Parry pushed his huge pipe into his pocket and betrayed an unsuspected faculty for glib tact.

"If the blame's on anyone, it's on my friend Culver," he said with a slow smile. "You see he led me astray coming here, and we came in at the back door. Any intelligent dog would resent a couple of tramps sneaking in at the back door. I'd make Dick pay for the damage if I were you, Mr. Foster."

The parson chuckled.

"There you are, Mrs. Coke—what have you to say to that? You must mulct Mr. Culver. Beguile him into your charming gallery and make him buy something really nice."

But Mrs. Coke would not be placated. She gazed ruefully at a heap of broken blue and white pottery that had once been a Lowestoft vase.

"That beast of a dog," she murmured, as if to herself. She tossed the pieces with disgust into a waste-paper basket. "I'll take the brute home now,

before it does any more harm. I'm sorry, Mr. Foster. I'll replace the vase, of course, as soon as I can find you another as good."

III

Parry went with her to release the dog.

"I'm used to savages—man and beast," he explained cynically, and despite Mrs. Coke's protests, he insisted.

Culver stayed talking to the parson. He felt awkward, and conversation came with difficulty. The old man, once Mrs. Coke had gone, sank on to a sofa and put his hand to his heart.

"Not too good for my old heart," he said, with a wry smile. "A very trying incident, Mr. Culver. Why will women keep these ferocious pets?"

He went on to speak of Mrs. Coke's call.

"A little mercenary, that lady, I fear," he said, and Culver was surprised at the querulous tone. It was unlike the old man. "The love of money—I'm afraid that—has wrought this evil."

He was panting, and showing obvious signs of distress.

Culver asked anxiously :

"Is there anything I can do for you? Don't you think we ought to get the doctor to have a look at you?"

"No, no, my boy. I shall be all right in a few minutes." The parson smiled gratefully. "Just a little shock, you know. But I have to be careful."

Culver explained the object of their visit.

"We were taking a tramp," he said, "and we thought we'd look in just to inquire how you were."

"A very kindly thought indeed," the old man beamed. "And a very ungracious reception you received." He went back to the subject of Mrs. Coke. Evidently she rankled.

"That dear lady, on the other hand, came to try to sell me some of her wares. She knows my weakness—I bought those." He indicated a couple of blue-and-white vases on the chimney-piece. "But I don't think it's quite playing the game to track a poor man to his own drawing-room with your goods. It puts him rather at a disadvantage." He smiled sourly. "She might have waited. But I suppose it's good business."

Parry came lounging back, enigmatic as ever.

"I've seen the lady on to her bicycle, and advised her to shoot the wolf," he said laconically.

Clement Foster looked up with a twinkle.

"It's no good shooting the wolf after the vase is broken," he commented dryly. "But now, you dear, good fellows, do let me offer you a little something to take after your excitement. Indeed, you have earned it. Mr. Culver, open the door and raise your voice and call Ellis. He will minister to our needs."

IV

They did not stay long. The parson was clearly ill, though he pressed them not to hurry.

Franklin Parry made the move to go, and Culver welcomed it. There was a most disturbing doubt in his mind that made it difficult for him to appear at ease.

Parry said quietly, as he finished his whisky and soda: "Mr. Foster, you'll be much better without company. Dick and I have caused enough trouble for one day." Culver wondered at this sudden use of his Christian name. This was the second time Parry had done it.

"Not a bit. Not a bit," the old man protested, but Parry was already on his feet.

"Now don't you get up. We found our way in and we'll find it out. And when you're really better, I very much want to see that old church of yours."

"But it's open now. The workmen are there. Go in," the parson broke in, pleased.

"No, I'll wait till you can show it to me," Parry retorted graciously, with the most human smile that Culver had ever seen on his face.

Clement Foster was almost pathetic in his friendliness as he bade them good-bye. "And when you come again there shall be no wolves in the fold," he said, as he waved to them from the sofa.

They went out, past the churchyard, and down the track which led to Bidely village. Parry had become unusually talkative, but Culver was broody and silent. They had gone half a mile or more before, with an effort, he at last decided to speak. And then he interrupted a long dissertation of Parry's on the subject of Alsatians with a brusque :

"Look here, Parry, there was a most damnable thing happened up there that you don't know of. I—Lord, I hate to say it—but Mrs. Coke—do you know I believe she's a real wrong 'un?"

"What's this, old man?" Parry asked, in mild surprise. He stooped down and plucked a coarse grass to ram into the stem of his pipe.

Culver was frowning like a puzzled child.

"It's a rotten thing to say," he blurted out, "but—do you think that woman's a crook?"

"That's a matter of degree," Parry answered, without expression. "Most dealers are."

"I know. But this is a serious matter, damned serious. Old Foster was looking at a miniature when we came to that window. She was trying to sell it to him, without doubt. And I saw it, Parry. I saw it when the table went over. The thing fell almost at my feet. And I'm positive that it was Thouais' 'Marquise de Granville,' the thing that was stolen from the Lowenstein collection. It's been photographed everywhere—a gorgeous bit of work—one of

the finest miniatures in the world. And it was there—jewelled frame and all—I'll swear it. That, or the finest copy that ever was made, and I know something about miniatures."

Parry had stopped.

"Steady, old man, steady," he said. "What exactly are you suggesting—that Mrs. Coke's a thief? That's a pretty serious thing to say, you know."

"That, or what's worse, the receiver," Culver retorted savagely. He was nettled by Parry's attitude. Always, this man tried to sheer him off when he approached the subject of the mystery of Mrs. Coke.

Parry seemed to sense his annoyance.

"Culver," he said patiently, "you do jump to conclusions. What is this picture?"

None too graciously, Culver told him, remembering as he did so that it was unlikely that Parry should have known the details of the sensational burglary, six weeks before, of Baron Lowenstein's chateau near Ghent. Parry would have been in the wilds of the Congo then, and he was not the sort of man to know that the Lowenstein collection was one of the finest in Europe.

"Well, and what do you think you ought to do about it?" Parry asked, with his irritating calm.

"I don't know," Culver snapped. "And you're not very helpful. Certainly I must give the old parson a tip."

Parry frowned through a dense puff of smoke.

"No, old man," he said quietly, "you mustn't do that. There are reasons."

"What reasons?" Culver demanded truculently.

"What could the old bird do if you did? That's one thing to consider." Parry looked about him and settled himself comfortably in a smooth patch of

grass. "And there are others. Sit down. I'm going to talk to you."

Culver obeyed unwillingly.

"Well?" he queried.

"Suppose you told the parson—and he believed you. He'd have to go to the police."

"Isn't that the obvious thing to do?"

"Perhaps. But not the wisest. If you're wrong, you make a gorgeous fool of yourself; and if you're right—where does it lead?"

"They get the woman, I suppose. That's what the police are for. Damn it all, Parry! I can't sit still and do nothing with crime going on under my very eyes."

Parry's slow smile fretted him almost beyond endurance. It made him feel hopelessly inferior, as though the man were playing with him, confident of his ability to fool him. Well, he wasn't going to this time. There was something behind it all—something very curious.

"So you think the bobbies just stroll round to The Pines, find the picture, shove the lady in jug, and that's that, do you? I'm an older man than you, Culver, so I can say things. You do take a damned sight too much for granted in this world. You're so apt to believe what you're told."

"Am I?" Culver asked angrily. "This time I'm going to believe what I saw—no matter what you say."

Parry ignored this outburst.

"And you saw?" he asked, then answered the question. "You saw Mrs. Coke and the parson with what you believe to be a stolen picture."

"I'm sure of it. That woman was scared stiff. And another thing: in the scrap she came deliberately outside and kicked the miniature away so that I couldn't see it. What have you got to say to that?"

"That it was almost as silly as trying to sell a well-

known picture to a simple parson. Think, man. If there was anything crooked about it the thing would be traced at once. No reason why the old bird shouldn't say where he bought it, is there?"

Culver was silenced for the moment. The fact was so obvious now that it was pointed out to him. What a fool he was—and Franklin Parry was just laughing at him.

"Then what the devil was he doing with it?" he asked blankly.

"Couldn't very well have been stolen, could it?" Parry answered blandly.

"And yet I could swear there was something wrong." Culver's brow was furrowed. A new, almost unbelievable idea had suddenly come to him.

"I say, Parry," he began slowly. "Old Foster was looking at it through a glass. And he never said a word about it. God! man. He couldn't be in it, too, could he?"

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it likely?" he asked incredulously.

But Culver hardly heard him. This new, impossible idea was rapidly becoming possible in his mind.

"I believe he is," he went on earnestly. "When you come to think of it, he was supposed to be ill. Nothing ill about him when he jumped from that table. And Mrs. Coke lied, too, about the dog. It's a horrible idea—but I'm right. I tell you I am——"

"Don't get excited," Parry broke in calmly, though he was eyeing Culver with a new interest. "You're only guessing."

"Guessing be damned," Culver said rudely. "You got any interest in these people, Parry?"

He was sorry the moment after he had uttered the words, but Parry's complete lack of emotion was maddening.

Franklin Parry seemed to be debating the question.

Culver looked at him, half in shame, half in wonder at not receiving an immediate denial. Then Parry gave a queer smile.

"As a matter of fact, I have," he said quietly. "They've been a hobby of mine for some months past. Your pal Peter particularly. Did you know he was in Oldford yesterday?"

Culver's face was a study in passing expression. Resentment, suspicion, curiosity, showed in his wide-open, grey eyes.

"Look here, what the devil are you talking about?" he asked, in a level voice. "Have you been fooling me?"

"Yes. All the time."

"And lying to me, too?"

"As well as I know how."

Culver flushed. In face of this frank confession, it was so hard to go on. He felt trapped, as though at any moment he might find himself up against some preposterous, utterly unanticipated menace prepared by Parry.

"Well, out with it," he said resentfully. "What's your game?"

Parry leaned forward, and one of his rare flashes of feeling came into his face.

"Old man, first of all I'll thank you for having done me a hell of a good turn, then I'll apologise for having to do what I've done. No need to worry about going to the police; in a way, I am the police."

"What? You're not a detective?"

"That's the answer."

"But where do I come in?" Dick Culver was utterly bewildered. Odd little details were flashing back into his mind, queer incongruities that seemed to bear out, conclusively, Parry's statement.

"You don't if you want to go out. But if you'd rather stay in, well—you could be very helpful."

Dick Culver would not answer for some moments; he was swallowing a very bitter pill. It was not easy to turn to a man who had deceived him as completely as Parry had done, and admit the perfect fool he had made of himself.

He stared vacantly across the hazy, purple common. He was stringing facts and details together with the facility of a mind trained in journalism. And he was very fair with himself. He had taken too much for granted; Parry was right. He had behaved throughout the whole affair like a callow youth doped by sentiment. And he had thought himself so clever.

An involuntary, sidelong glance at his companion showed that strange man of mystery impassive as ever, pulling away at his pipe like an automaton. Culver thought of Jean. What was his place, now, in this abstruse puzzle? Of Elsa, and the Rue Jan Hoeck, and Peter—Parry had said he was in Oldford yesterday; what the deuce did he mean by that?

Then his mind fixed on Ann Gray, that queer, sensation-seeking girl, and for a time he forgot his own chagrin. Ann couldn't be mixed up with these people seriously—mixed up with criminals. It was a beastly thought, an unwelcome one. What did this apathetic, inscrutable man Parry know—or suspect—about Ann?

Once more he glanced swiftly at Parry. He looked like an image carved in brown stone. How the devil could you tell what a man like that was thinking? Or what he knew? He was eerie, inhuman.

But the image moved at that moment, as though it were thoroughly aware of the swift, furtive inspection. The bleached eyes, from which it seemed that years of sun had taken all the colour, half-closed in a most engaging smile.

"Feeling a bit sore, aren't you?" Parry said, with uncanny understanding. "I don't blame you.

Honestly, I've hated it as much as you. But it had to be. Mine's a rotten job sometimes. I'd pull out, if I were you. No good looking for trouble. You're on a romantic wild goose chase if you'd only recognise it. That fellow Jean—he was only one of the gang. There's no romance about him—just sordid crime, that's all."

But Culver wasn't thinking of Jean of the Natation then. Ann still filled his mind. And he was afraid of Parry.

He looked up suddenly. "I don't want to be offensive," he said, "but a man when he's been made a fool of isn't at his best. How am I to know that you are not still fooling me? Suppose I don't—and do go to the police."

Parry knocked his pipe out on his heel, and ground the embers into the dry earth.

"You won't, old man," he said, with a shake of the head. "I'm too good a judge of men. Listen."

V

Lolling back on the soft grass, Franklin Parry told a story that enthralled and convinced Culver. He told it with humour and a real appreciation of drama. He made his points crisply, and he dropped much of his lackadaisical manner as he spoke.

He was one of Pringle's men, he said. Pringle's is the famous Chicago private detective agency whose men rival the best police detectives in the world.

Culver knew of their reputation. The firm prides itself upon never dropping a case. Patiently, relentlessly, they harry their prey for years. No criminal ever feels safe with Pringle's after him; they are not like the police, who abandon a crime after a time and are glad to have a failure forgotten. Pringle's reduced burglaries in jewellers' shops by eighty per cent. in

three years after the retail jewellers' association employed them.

And Parry, although he would not say who his principal was, admitted he was engaged in an art robbery case, like the Lowenstein affair.

"There's a gang at this work as clever as sin," he said, "and, Culver, you've led me to them, I believe. Some of the stuff I'm after turned up in Antwerp. That's why I was there. I got on to Peter there. He calls himself Captain Mingay at other times."

He waited to see the effect of his words, and smiled as Culver gasped:

"Good Lord! The fellow was in the Palace Hotel yesterday. I——" He stopped abruptly. "Why—why didn't you nab him?" he asked haltingly, for he recalled that Ann had been talking to this very man.

Parry seemed to enjoy the joke.

"You've got to have the definite proof before you 'nab' people, as you call it," he laughed. "That's why we've got to let Mrs. Coke and Foster have a bit more rope. Do you know, Culver, I thought you were in it the first time you went to the Rue Jan Hoeck. Oh, I saw you, old man; I beat you back to the hotel by about ninety seconds when the rain began. I knew the nearest way and you didn't."

"Well, I'm damned!" Culver exclaimed blankly.

"You weren't the only one who was fooled," Parry grinned. He went on to explain how he had been following Culver when he was attacked in the darkness. "Even then," he said, "I had my suspicions. You were too easily persuaded not to confide in the police. But when you took me back to the shop next day and the birds had gone—I had to acquit you. And when you put me on to Marie Schmidt and made a link with dear Mrs. Coke—Gad! you did me a good turn." Parry smiled his gratitude.

Culver shot eager questions at him. Then with more seriousness he asked :

"You talk of a gang. Who's in this gang?"

"That's what I want to know."

"But do you mean Mrs. Coke, and Elsa, and Mingay, and the parson, and—and Ann Gray, and——" He stopped.

"Probably," Parry nodded grimly. "All of them, I imagine, and perhaps more. And I want the lot, and I'm going to get them." He spoke with a fierce confidence.

"But when?" Culver demanded uneasily.

Parry jerked his head in the direction of Bidely Church.

"Before that old bird's tenancy of the Rectory is up," he said. "That's the best good turn you've done me, leading me to him. He's not down here for his health. They're up to something in this neighbourhood, and that's when I'm going to get 'em—with the goods on 'em."

Culver looked at his companion in a startled way. The wooden expression of indifference had gone. Parry looked alert, watchful, and without pity.

From the trees by the church, there came the faint sound of a motor running. Parry's head swung round to listen.

"Car, eh?" he said, with a smile that betrayed keen anticipation. "Suppose we roll ourselves behind that clump of furze, and see who goes by." He shifted position like a trained scout, head and shoulders kept low, the whole body moving easily and unobtrusively. Culver felt clumsy as he scuttled awkwardly to cover.

Then the car slid by, the bucolic Ellis at the wheel, and huddled on the back seat, the retiring figure of the Rev. Clement Foster.

"That settles it," Parry murmured. "That's our sick man. I'd give a bit to know where he's off to."

CHAPTER XII

I

PARRY went up to London that night. He announced his decision when he reached the hotel, and he had less than half an hour to pack his bag and catch the train.

He left Culver with only the vaguest of explanations, and a rather bewildering one at that.

"This means a change of plan," he stated, without any preliminary discussion. "I'll communicate, old man. If you *can* let the fair Bill know I've gone for a relation's funeral, so much the better. You'll see the relation in to-day's *Times*—Colonel Franklin, of Southsea; he's my uncle. Hearty old warrior, eighty-six. Read the obituary, that'll give you the tip."

And Dick Culver, thinking over the incredible events of the day, after a lonely dinner, found this sudden departure as hard to explain as any.

He read the obituary. Colonel George Franklin, C.B., certainly was a fine old warrior. He had served in pretty nearly every campaign from the Zulu War to the South African, but that he was Parry's uncle Culver found it difficult to believe.

Parry was inexplicable. The man was like a sphinx; he knew so much and said so little. Though he had spoken of the help that Culver might be to him, he had indicated no particular line of action. "Keep pally with Bill Coke and don't go near the parson" was all he had said in reply to Culver's question as to what he wanted him to do. And now he had flitted.

Culver spent some of the most restless days of his life killing time in Oldford, with only a post card from Parry with a scribbled "Can't get back for a day or two" under a picture of the Victory's Anchor

on Southsea front, to persuade him that Parry had not deserted him permanently. And the card was posted in Southsea; that surprised him more than anything.

He had tried to sort out things in his mind, and reduced himself to a state of suspicious bewilderment. That Mrs. Coke was a crook he had little doubt; but this gang that Parry had spoken of sounded a little melodramatic. His suggestion that "the gang"—Culver could not help thinking of it in quotation marks—was up to some definite crime in the neighbourhood savoured more of an American film than of real life. One read of these things in cheap novels usually, these organised communities who dealt in stolen art treasures. One did not come across them actually. And yet he had. He was certain about the miniature, but now by no means so certain of the parson.

Parsons didn't do these things; the very idea was loathsome; nor, for that matter, did women so well known and reputable as Mrs. Wilfred Coke. And yet indubitably they did. Bill Coke's intimate friend was Marie Schmidt, and Mingay, the man he had known as Peter, a rough loafer in an Antwerp slum, was a visitor at The Pines, was known to Ann Gray; a man, Culver had little doubt, who had tried to kill him.

The thing was a nightmare, a travesty of probability, yet only too probable.

What Parry had said of Jean was only too probable. This man was one of "the gang." Yet that only made his identity the more elusive.

An English gentleman and a criminal, who had died with the words of the Penitent Thief on the Cross upon his lips. There was a poignant tragedy there, and a secret, a secret Dick Culver was more than glad he had not revealed. Jean had passed beyond the reach of human justice, repentant in the end. Poor

devil! It was a pretty horrible thing to think of a decent man sinking as low as that.

But Ann Gray? Where did she come in? She was decent, and charming, and young; and Parry had as good as said he believed her to be mixed up in this detestable affair. What in heaven's name had come over the world?

Instinctively Dick Culver kept out of Oldford. He shrank from a meeting with Mrs. Coke, almost more so from seeing Ann. His faith in human nature was shaken; he felt unclean. There were moments when he debated, seriously, clearing out altogether—sending a letter to Parry's bank to say he had taken his advice and had decided to drop the whole matter.

He spent his time in exploring the neighbourhood, leaving the Blue Boar immediately after breakfast and returning late to dinner. He wandered for miles about the country, finding a certain restfulness about the lonelier parts of the coast, or tramping the deserted commons, with their rare glimpses of the distant sea from the higher ground.

Once he found himself on the breezy, bracken-covered waste of Hithe Heath, gazing across the dancing water of Walm Harbour to the grim Norman tower of Salthithe Castle, looking immensely old and grey in contrast with the cluster of mellow, red brick houses round about it. He wondered if ever, now, he would go there with Ann, as she had promised.

That was on the third day after Parry's departure, and he reached the hotel late and weary, to find a note from Mrs. Coke waiting for him.

She bade him and Parry come in that evening after dinner. "Some of the children are going to dance," she said, and added: "I do hope you have both forgiven me for Dirk's behaviour. If you don't come I shall think you haven't."

The note was so conventional and simple that it

almost angered Culver. It annoyed him that Mrs. Coke should think that she could deceive him so easily, and his instinct was to refuse.

But Parry had asked him to "keep pally" with the woman, so he supposed he must go. Reluctantly he changed, and more reluctantly made his way to The Pines soon after nine o'clock.

II

"The children" consisted of about a dozen of the young people Culver had seen about Oldford; many of them Ann's companions. But there were others.

They were dancing in the big studio, with the old furniture crammed up into even a smaller space at one end. A gramophone was throbbing out a popular two-step when he entered, and near to it, fixed on the great Flemish dower chest, a loud speaker stood in readiness for action as soon as dance music should be broadcast.

Mrs. Coke was dancing with an elderly, soldier-like man with close-clipped grizzled moustache, but she broke off as soon as she caught sight of Culver, and came towards him, bringing her partner with her.

"So you have forgiven me," she began, with a smile of welcome. "But where's the Congo man? Does he still bear malice? Sir James wanted to meet him; he knows those dreadful countries." She turned to her companion. "This is Mr. Culver, whom Dirk tried to kill. Mr. Culver, Sir James Ellenglaze."

Culver bowed, and looked up sharply at Sir James. He knew his name well; General Ellenglaze was a distinguished man. He had been in the papers recently on his return from the West Indies, where he had just relinquished a colonial governorship. What was he doing in this place?

Culver managed to disguise his surprise, and he laughed lightly enough as he answered:

"I don't think Mr. Parry bears any malice, Mrs. Coke. He was called away, to a funeral—a Colonel Franklin in Southsea."

Ellenglaze broke in :

"What, poor old George Franklin? Is he a relation? How curious! I've known Franklin all my life. A fine old man! I was awfully upset when I read he had gone."

Culver's lips tightened. This was a bad beginning, unless Parry's story really were true. But he would have to bluff it out.

"Really?" he said with polite interest. "Yes, I had a card from Parry yesterday, from Southsea, to say he couldn't get back for a day or two. So you mustn't bear him malice, Mrs. Coke." He managed to speak frivolously.

"I'll reserve judgment," she answered in the same light manner. "But it really was dreadful, wasn't it? I feel most awfully guilty. I was telling Sir James."

The General commented frankly :

"My dear Maude, if you will keep these wild beasts, what can you expect? I hope the brute isn't about to-night."

"Don't be frightened," she said with mock concern. "I won't let him bite you." Then she went on to Culver : "But it really is serious, you know. Poor Mr. Foster's been in bed ever since. I went over to inquire. His heart, you know. I am so worried."

The dance finished, and suddenly a dreary voice talking about the prospective harvest yield filled the room. Someone had turned on the loud speaker, and a great roar of laughter went up at a sepulchral announcement about quarters to the acre.

Mrs. Coke said, "Those idiotic children!" and called out : "Do stop it, someone." But the voice droned on, and she ran from them, calling over her shoulder : "Sir James, you know where the drinks

are; take Mr. Culver to them. I must stop this awful noise."

Ellenglaze murmured: "Damned fine hostess, Maude. Come on, Culver, let's obey orders. I can do with a peg. And so your friend Parry is a relative of old George Franklin. I'd like to meet him when he comes back. I'd have gone to the funeral myself, but it's such a deuce of a journey. I wonder if I ever met Parry; I've met lots of George's kith and kin."

Culver was on tenterhooks. Here was a dilemma that was going to lead to disaster if he were not careful. He answered vaguely:

"This chap's been abroad a lot. But he'll be back in a day or two. Do you know the Congo, General?"

Sir James was side-tracked for a moment with a reminiscence of the Ashanti scrap in the nineties, and they came to the dining-room, where drinks and sandwiches were laid out on the mahogany table.

Mrs. Coke's sedate old servant, Ada, assisted by a gauche country girl, was presiding over the table. The General edged his way through the little crowd, exclaiming, "Ah, there's Beatrice!" and piloted Culver to the far side of the room, where a rather old-fashioned smart woman was talking to a genial parson.

"Beatrice," he said, breaking in upon their talk, "this is Mr. Culver, whose pal Parry is a relative of poor old George Franklin's. Culver, my wife."

Culver's heart sank.

Lady Ellenglaze smiled upon him. She was evidently bored with the parsonical *tête-à-tête*.

"How very curious!" she said. Then, to his relief: "So you are the man Maude's brute of a dog went for." She spoke crisply, with a dominating, self-confident manner. "Dear Maude! I'm very fond of her, but she lacks sense. I've always told her so."

Culver made some commonplace reply. He was

puzzled to think why Mrs. Coke had broadcast this story of Bidely Rectory so freely; certainly she made no secret of it.

The General said, "You'll have a whisky-and-soda," as if it were a parade order, and went off to get it; and the parson spoke up apologetically: "Poor Mr. Foster! I was over at Bidely this morning, and found him very poorly—very poorly."

His voice seemed to recall his existence to Lady Ellenglaze's mind.

"Do you know Mr. Frazer?" she asked Culver, with something of the same imperious manner of her husband.

"I think not," Culver said.

"Mr. Frazer is rector of Flackston," she stated by way of introduction, then ignored the unfortunate rector again and reopened the dangerous topic.

"Now, which of George Franklin's people is your friend?" she demanded.

Culver floundered.

"Parry—Franklin Parry, a—a nephew," he answered.

"Oh! On Millicent's side of the family." Her inquisitive eyes half closed in thought. "That's Frank, I remember him," she went on brusquely. "He was a black sheep. I hope he's reformed."

Culver found himself laughing, with what sounded to him obvious insincerity. He would have to see this thing through more for his own sake than for Parry's. And he would have to take chances.

"I think so, Lady Ellenglaze," he said. "He's knocked about a lot abroad, you know. He's quite tame now, quite mellowed."

"As I remember, there was room for reform," she replied tartly. "Still I'd like to see him. Bring him over, Mr. Culver. Come to lunch one day. I'll ask Maude, too."

She seemed to judge, from his uncomprehending expression, Culver's confusion.

"But perhaps you don't know. We've got a place near here—at Rangrave, near Eckenham. You must let me know when Frank gets back."

Groping for any means of diverting this unwelcome conversation, Culver said:

"How kind of you. I will, of course. Won't you dance?"

She accepted at once. For all her years Lady Ellenglaze had evidently no intention, yet, of surrendering to age.

Culver went back to the safer topic of Mrs. Coke.

"You knew her husband, I expect," he queried.

Lady Ellenglaze nodded. Obviously she thought little of the deceased Wilfred. She suggested the tragedy of his end with a swift lift of her eyebrows and a sour, "Such a pity," they went on to eulogise Maude.

She danced really well, in the more tutored manner of a past generation, and as they went round and round the floor, Culver judged that Beatrice Ellenglaze had known Mrs. Coke for many years.

"Quite the most amusing dear I know," she described her, adding, "And don't you think it superbly plucky of her to take up this business?" in a tone that dared him to disagree.

As Dick Culver murmured, "Amazingly plucky, Lady Ellenglaze," he thought of the satanic humour of the situation; of this censorious, domineering woman's astonishment if she knew exactly what Bill's business was: of the possibility of that stolen miniature being still in this house filled with respectable and ultra-conventional friends of a criminal.

That was one of the most incredible features of this mystery of Mrs. Coke—her friends. Did Elsa and Mingay rub shoulders with these people at times,

he asked himself. Mrs. Coke introduced him to several of the older people. All of them seemed to accept her as a charming hostess and welcome acquaintance; some even on terms of friendship—like Lady Ellenglaze.

There was a wizened little lawyer man and his wife—Nonnary, a well-known leader at the Chancery Bar; he called her Bill and spoke of how she had dined at their flat in Westminster. And the Denning, some of the big wigs of Oldford, retired Anglo-Indians; Mrs. Denning was voluble in singing Mrs. Coke's praises. She was "such a dear to our girls," she explained. "She gives them such a good time."

The whole thing beat Culver. He danced and chatted with apparent carelessness, but all the time one part of his brain was puzzling this extraordinary situation. It was too utterly fantastic to see Mrs. Coke moving about so easily among her guests, always with her calm, confident, hospitable manner, and yet to have to connect her with Peter, and Elsa and Jean and all the sordid beastliness of crime.

And to realise that Franklin Parry was waiting to trap her; that one day, quite soon perhaps, Parry would give the word, and dull-faced policemen would come for Bill Coke.

This time next year—where would she be? The thought came to him as he was dancing with her, and he felt for the second that she must have read his thoughts.

"You're very solemn, all of a sudden," she said, looking up at him quizzically.

He tried to laugh it off.

"Am I?" he answered. "I'm solemn by nature, Mrs. Coke—and really quite a shy young man."

She said nothing; but he wondered whether it was to Aylesbury or Holloway that they sent women con-

victs, and he felt suddenly terribly sorry for Bill Coke. A great revulsion of feeling came over him. He vowed to himself that he would have nothing to do with Parry's schemes. Detectives might be necessary in life, but their job was a beastly one. Let Parry do his own dirty work.

Mrs. Coke looked up at him again, with a trace of disappointment in her keen blue eyes, as the dance finished.

"You're a very silent young man," she said reprovingly. "I feel quite jealous of those all-absorbing thoughts."

III

Ann Gray had been dancing with the General and, from the expression on their faces, he had enjoyed it more than she.

She made an impish grimace at Culver, and came across the room to where he and Mrs. Coke were standing.

"There, Bill, I've done my duty twice. Pompous old pet, isn't he?" she said with mocking gravity. "And how's Richard Culver behaving?"

"Badly," Bill laughed. "The poor dear is distrait. Cheer him up, Ann; I think he's feeling his age." She left them and went again about her duties.

Culver had had very few words with Ann that evening. She was in enormous demand as a partner, and he tried to make light of Bill's reproof with a half serious request for at least one dance, if Ann would take pity on him.

She looked at him in surprise.

"Of course," she said in her slow way. "That's what I came for. I want to hear about the Congo man. The bad egg, or Lady Ellenglaze says he is. I love real bad lads, they're so exciting. Do tell me what you told her."

"But I didn't tell her anything," Culver protested in confusion. "She said she knew him, that's all."

He was feeling most uncomfortable. If Ann started pumping him about Parry, with her devastating candour his story of old acquaintanceship would probably be discovered a fraud in five minutes.

"But you must have told her something," Ann persisted. "She was full of it—telling Bill just now."

Despair threw Culver back to a defensive policy of raillery.

"What was she full of?" he demanded in a teasing voice.

"Well, she as good as said that your pal had to skip the country when he was young."

Culver felt a sudden sense of apprehension; a swift, uneasy doubt. But he put it out of his mind for the moment. He must head Ann off this subject somehow.

They had begun dancing again.

"There's not a word of truth in it," he laughed. "Frank Parry"—he had picked up the name from Lady Ellenglaze—"is one of the most pious people I ever knew. Didn't she tell you he was a missionary?"

"No. You rotting?"

"Never more serious in my life, Ann. He specialises in cannibals. Makes 'em vegetarians first of all, then goes straight for their black hearts. A wonder, Frank Parry. A real revivalist—sort of Congo Salvation Army——"

"Oh, shut up, Richard," Ann drawled. "Why won't you tell me about him?"

"But I am telling you about him, my child. And like the black persons, you will not listen to the truth."

"I said you were a rotten liar," she answered. "You are—toshy."

"All right. Let's try another topic, if you don't like my pious pal."

She seemed quite willing to drop the subject—too willing, he thought—and she referred to the other common topic of the evening; the incident at Bidely Rectory.

"It's fuggy here. Let's go into the garden for a bit—unless you're afraid Dirk will go for you again," she said, breaking off in the middle of the waltz.

"You've heard that story, too?" he laughed.

Ann nodded.

"Poor Bill, she's taken it terribly to heart. Doesn't mind about you so much—it's the comic parson. She thinks she's killed him."

Culver reassured her.

They stood on the broad verandah outside the studio talking of the affair, Ann inciting him to explain exactly how it happened.

"As far as I can make out," she said at last, "it was all your fault, yours and the missionary's. Bill's a fool to worry."

"She is," he agreed cheerily. "Ann, what a perfect night!"

It was a perfect night; still and dark, with just a touch of autumn mist hovering about to tone the cold blue of the stars to a warmer tint. Ann leaned forward and filled her lungs with the clean night air.

"I suppose we are idiots, aren't we, to stay hopping about indoors? Go and bag me a coat from somewhere, Richard. We'll go for a walk."

He found his own coat and put it on her, and she led him across the lawn and down a narrow, pitch-black path, where straggling twigs from the bordering hedges brushed their faces, mysterious and unseen, until they came to the garden wall, and a boat-house by the very edge of the river.

Ann tried the door.

"Oh, curse Bill!" she said petulantly. "It's locked."

"Can I get the key?" he asked eagerly.

"No. No. Bill would only fuss. Give me a leg up."

She scrambled lightly to the top of the wall, and he followed. From where they sat, but for a narrow strip of marsh, the river was at their very feet. It looked immensely desolate and solitary.

The strident notes of the loud speaker came to them in odd, fleeting bursts from the house, but from the water there was an eerie silence broken now and again by the plaintive cry of some wild bird.

Ann had become quiet, fascinated by the beauty of the autumn night. Once she put her hand on his arm and whispered: "Listen!"

A strange, mournful piping came over the flats, from some redshank flitting about in the marsh.

"Must be rather a jolly life, don't you think?" she said almost sadly.

"What?" he asked.

"Wild birds. Nothing to worry about. Wouldn't you like to be able to fly out there now—into the mystery? . . ."

Her mood unsettled him. He laughed self-consciously.

"Not so much fun with an ardent gunner about, blazing off at you," he said.

"But then it would be all over—quickly. You'd have had your fun. . . ."

"Ann, what's the matter?" he asked, really surprised. "You aren't usually so morbid."

"No. Only now and then." His tone seemed to have broken the spell. "Mysterious, unknown things often get me like that. It seems so exciting. One wants to know. And yet it's so dull when you do

know. The sameness—and the safeness. Don't you ever want excitement?"

"You want smacking, my child," he said brusquely. "You've got more than most young women of your age, and now you're pining for the vast unknown, and dangers, and excitements—looking for trouble, in fact! I should think it the dulllest life on earth to be a redshank. Messing about in the mud all day. Buck up, Ann. You'd better get out of Oldford if this is how it affects you. Try a change of scene, my dear."

He was acting with intent. He, too, had felt the witchery of the night, but it seemed to him that Ann was speaking in allegory, trying, perhaps, in a hesitant way to explain something of herself to him. For a moment he was sorry that he had checked her talk. Perhaps she wanted his help—or advice—and this was her oblique method of suggesting it.

She did not answer him, and he went on abruptly, half apologetically, ready to jump from grave to gay at her response.

"That is——" he stammered, "I mean, Ann, there's nothing gone wrong, is there?—I mean, you haven't really got the hump?"

From her illusive laugh he knew that he had lost his chance if ever there had been one.

"Not now," she said. "The Reverend Richard has dispelled the gloom with his nice, little, moral preachment. You ought to be a missionary, too. Come on—let's go back. I've cut about eight dances."

She went on ahead of him, and but for a cheery wave of the hand when he left, that was all he saw of Ann Gray that evening.

IV

Culver caught a fleeting glimpse of Ann the next morning. She was turning out of the High Street

into the London Road, and missed a lorry coming carelessly down the hill by something less than a foot.

Ann might have many virtues, he thought, but careful driving was not one of them. And she didn't seem to care a row of pins. She called out a cheerful, "Sorry. My fault," to the scared lorry driver, and went gaily on up the hill, quite unconcerned. But Bill Coke, who was by her side, looked hysterical. Culver saw her draw herself up, braced for a smash. She looked almost haggard at that moment.

Neither Bill, nor Ann, had seen him, and Culver went on his way wondering, and depressed. He could not explain this intimacy save in one way, and that way he would not admit. It was damnable of Parry even to have hinted that Ann was mixed up with Mrs. Coke's underground life.

But Ann was driving Mrs. Coke to Bidely Rectory at the moment. She took the last half-mile of winding track from the main road at a mad speed.

"Ann, you're a devil," Bill said as she got out of the car. And there was not much jest in her tone as she said it.

Ann retorted slowly, "What's the matter, Bill? I haven't crashed you yet," and proceeded to turn the two-seater while Mrs. Coke went into the house. She fixed the car to her satisfaction and lit a cigarette. Though Bill had said she would only be a minute, Ann was sceptical. Bill's minutes were illusory.

Fully five had passed when the little man came plodding up the road; they had passed him just after they had turned into the Church Lane, as the winding, unfenced track was known locally. He had jumped like a hare at the sound of Ann's horn; it was largely that which had made her finish the journey at such breakneck speed.

She watched him with mild interest as he toiled along the shadeless heath. He looked so moist and

hot. He waved a cheap-looking, soft felt hat in a futile attempt to discourage a cloud of flies that buzzed about his perspiring head—a ludicrous head, largely bald, but with one pathetic, Napoleonic lock of straggling fair hair which had fallen untidily almost over his eyes.

He looked as if he hated his clothes—a thick, double-breasted blue serge coat and a stiff, white collar particularly. The collar had wilted, and the coat was flung open in a vain attempt to cheat it of some of its heat-giving properties. He was rather like a superior fisherman in his Sunday best, she thought, though the camera slung round his shoulders indicated tripper.

As she came nearer, Ann saw him goggling at her. Evidently he disapproved of her cigarette, and that roused the natural devil in her.

He looked about him vacantly, great beads of sweat standing out on his pallid face.

“You looking for anything?” Ann called to him lazily.

He replaced his hat and removed it quickly.

“I wanted to ’ave a look at the church, miss,” he answered in rich Cockney.

Ann’s expression was grave as an owl’s.

“There it is,” she said, waving a hand towards little St. Nicholas. “A perfectly good church. A bit old, perhaps, but they’re mending it.”

“Can I get in?” he asked, in a voice that showed that he was not quite sure if she were serious or not.

“Rather,” she answered, smiling for the first time. She felt sorry for this bewildered, little man. “The door’s open; there are workmen there. Go through the gate; it’s all right.”

“Thank you, miss.” He hesitated a moment, recognising the entente. And to add his share to it, he said, with a polite smile: “A very ’ot morning.

If I might suggest, them tyres won't do no good in this sun. It's my trade, miss."

Ann glanced down quickly. The man was quite right.

"Good lad," she said casually. "Thanks for the tip."

He wandered through the little gate to the church, and she backed the car into the shade. When she looked up again he had gone. She was sorry. He would have amused her till Bill came. Little, Cockney motor-mechanics, with a taste for old churches, were unusual.

Bill's minute ran into ten. When she did appear she looked fretful.

"Is it all right?" Ann asked cheerfully.

Mrs. Coke shrugged her shoulders with indifference. "Look here, Ann," she said, "for God's sake drive back decently. I'm all on edge this morning."

Ann drove as far as the main road at snail's pace, and the pallid, perspiring little man passed clean out of her mind.

V

But he was an earnest little man, though possessed of the great gift of Cockney humour.

Even before he heard the sound of Ann's engine running, he was on good terms with the four workmen engaged on the chancel roof. They thought him funny from the moment he entered, treading almost on tip-toe, and calling up to them in an awed whisper:

"Don't mind my 'aving a look round, mates, do you?"

They called him "sir," instinctively, at first, but when St. Nicholas' clear, treble bell struck noon, and Amos Gill, the foreman, came down the ladder preparatory to knocking off for the dinner-hour, the little

man approached him with friendly deference and a fund of inquiry about the antiquities of the church.

"Very old place, ain't it, mate?" he queried. "'Obby of mine, churches. I'd like to take some pictures. No objection, I suppose?"

Amos thought not, and suggested, with bucolic humour, that the visitor start by taking him and his men on the ladder.

"Worm 'untin', we are," he said in his pleasant Suffolk voice. "That 'ere roof 'ave got it terrible bad."

The stranger recalled that a place near Westminster Abbey had got it, too. "Costing them tharsands of quid killing the little blighters, so the papers say," he announced. Then, "All right, mates, 'op up there, I'll take a picture," he added, swinging the camera from his shoulder.

The four of them dressed the ladder, grinning oafishly.

The stranger chatted on about the church, then remembered suddenly that he was keeping these men from their meal.

"But you chaps want to get off to your dinner," he broke off in the midst of a question. "Do I 'ave to go, or d'yer leave it open?"

"That's all right, old fellow," Amos reassured him. "Us chaps is only goin' round the corner. Don't you hurry."

The visitor thanked them profusely, and the men filed out, smiling sheepishly at his funny, outlandish ways. A simple lot of chaps these Londoners were—afraid like, when they got into the country.

The little man gave himself up to a careful examination of the church. He peered here, there, and everywhere, even discovering the tower door and adventuring up into the lower chamber where the workmen kept some of their stores.

He took a picture from the tower window, another

from the open door of the nave, showing the rectory, cool and placid in its setting of trees. Then he fixed the camera to take a general interior of the church, and gave it a time exposure. And as he waited by the door, with a swift glance over his shoulder, he withdrew the great key, silently, from its lock.

It was back again in a few seconds—the visitor was obviously used to the task—but in those few seconds he had taken a squeeze of it; a perfect impression in a lump of soft wax he produced from his pocket.

A few moments later he performed the same deft operation with the key to the tower door. Then he picked up his camera and went in search of the workmen.

He found them in the shade of the chancel, on the north side, munching their rough fare, handkerchiefs spread out on the grass before them and a big jug in their midst.

"Seen all you want, old fellow?" Amos asked, as he chewed at his bread and cheese.

"Yes, thanks, mate," the stranger answered. "Got some nice pictures, too, I think. If you chaps comes out all right, I'll send you a print. Where'll I send it?"

All four looked anxious, but Amos Gill spoke up first.

"Gill my name is," he said. "Amos Gill, Station Road, Eckenham. That'll find me. Will you 'ave one?" He indicated the jug. "That comes from the old gent what's taken the rectory. Very kind gentleman, Reverend Foster. Not like Reverend Britain what belongs here. Tea, 'im, if anything."

The others guffawed appreciatively.

The little man picked up the jug with a nod of gratitude.

"Them parsons!" he said expressively. "'Ere's luck, mates."

He took a long pull, and wiped his mouth. "And very nice, too," he commented, with an engaging smile. "'Arris my name. Len 'Arris, chauffeur to a gentleman in Kensington."

The younger of the workmen had a sister in service in Kensington. Mr. Leonard Harris remained for some time discussing the respective amenities of London and Eckenham. Not until one mellow note from the church clock struck, to tell that the dinner-hour had run its course, did Mr. Harris leave his new-made friends. If the picture came out all right he'd bring it over himself before his holiday was over, he promised.

Amos Gill and his fellows were well pleased with this pleasant little interlude, but they still thought these London chaps funny.

VI

Sheer boredom drove Dick Culver up to the golf-course after lunch that day, and a perverse fate threw Malcolm Nonnary at him the moment he entered the club.

Nonnary greeted him with the brisk heartiness with which he was used to welcome a likely witness in the box in his junior days, and there was no escape.

Culver played a disgraceful round, and Nonnary, approaching each shot as though it were a legal argument to which he would not commit himself without much thought and precedent, beat him six up and five, and then insisted upon tea.

Nonnary kept up a placid adulation of Mrs. Coke; Bill, as he called her, with an air of reckless daring. He laboured Bill's pluck and Wilfred's worthlessness until Culver wanted to blaspheme.

This sort of thing made him doubt his sanity. If a

stodgy, pawky, Chancery lawyer admired, so wholeheartedly, Mrs. Coke, could it be possible, Culver asked himself, that she were the cunning, crooked, deliberate criminal that he had the best of reasons to believe her?

Nonnary seemed to resent his tepid acquiescence. To prevent an outburst, Culver invented a business telephone-call to escape from the lawyer's irritating: "Don't you think so, Culver?"

But a real call came soon after dinner. Culver was sipping his coffee in moody uncertainty of mind when the porter came for him.

"Mr. Parry on the telephone, sir," he said, and Culver felt an immense relief. He hurried to the box in the hall.

"Hallo," he called, more cheerfully than he had spoken all day. "That you, Parry? Where are you—London?"

Parry's slow, distinctive voice came clearly across the wire.

"Hallo, old man," he said. "Listen. I've got to be quick. You know Plomesgate?"

"No. Plomesgate?"

"Well, it's about five miles beyond the Oldford bridge. Look on a map. I want you to walk over there to-morrow. Come early—I'll give you breakfast—and come quiet."

"But, Parry——" Culver was completely at sea.

"Don't 'but' till to-morrow, old man. Nine o'clock or sooner. Keep the straight road. I'll be looking out for you. Can you do it?"

"Why—yes. But——"

"Good. See you to-morrow."

Parry had hung up, and Culver was left glaring foolishly at a dumb telephone.

CHAPTER XIII

I

THE town of Oldford stops short at the bridge; a crazy, picturesque, weed-covered, timber structure that crosses the narrow mouth of the river.

The bridge is boldly labelled, "Not Safe for Heavy Traffic," and only the lightest of cars use it, at their own risk, and, save at holiday times, very little wheeled traffic uses it at all. For the road beyond the bridge is villainous, and it leads to a pleasant nowhere, a breezy country that has never quite made up its mind whether to be waste or cultivation.

There are a few plucky fields scattered about among the bracken and gorse, but mainly the heath land predominates all the way from the river to the outskirts of Street village, beyond which the road peters out into a mere track.

There is one tiny oasis. About four miles along the road is the hamlet of Plomesgate, consisting of a scattered score of cottages and the Spratboat inn.

Amateur artists adore Plomesgate. They think its primitive inconveniences so quaint. Each summer two or three of the houses are let, at exorbitant rentals, to soulful young women with lank hair and easels, who shock the natives by the shameless way in which they bathe from the bleak shingle and wander about in various stages of undress, smoking their cigarettes incessantly. Plomesgate's idea that artists are poor, afflicted folk, who must be considered as irresponsible children, is not unjustified.

But Dick Culver met no artists on his four-mile tramp early that morning. He met nobody but a cyclist near the bridge and a couple of fishermen jogging into Oldford in an antiquated pony-trap bearing

their night's catch. The country, in the freshness of the young day, appealed to him immensely. It was so very restful and out of the world. He wished to heaven he were going merely for a holiday walk, not to meet Parry in these furtive, mysterious circumstances, to be plunged once more into a sordid world of intrigue.

What on earth was Parry up to now? he asked himself vainly. Why had he staged this extraordinary meeting? Had the fellow ever been away at all?

Culver shook his head involuntarily, as if with distaste for the thought. He was growing to disbelieve everything, so frankly contradictory were all the circumstances associated with Mrs. Coke and Franklin Parry and the people connected with them. Even Parry's story hardly held water. Was the man a detective? Lady Ellenglaze—she, at least, was real, or he supposed so—had spoken of him as a man with a past; a bad egg, as Ann had called him. Then what was he doing as a detective? Detectives weren't usually men of decent family, as Parry appeared to be.

A great marsh hare came loping down the lonely road. It stopped for a moment, its long ears erect, as it caught sight of Culver, then turned and bounded away. Culver came back to earth and forgot his misgivings for the time being in the joy of the air and sea and of Nature.

Plomesgate hove in sight, its little cottages of red brick, often tarred against the weather, dropped about haphazard among the bracken and gorse. Only two or three were by the roadside, and from one of those a sun-bleached sign, of some impossible vessel, indicated the inn. Culver had thoughts of an early draught of beer.

There were white, purposeful chickens ambling

about the road, and some children playing by the way-side. But no sign of Franklin Parry.

Culver passed on, puzzled. Then, perhaps a couple of hundred yards beyond the inn, a loafer, sprawled at full length in the grass, called lazily: "Hallo, old man, you're in good time. Had any breakfast?"

II

He wasn't a tramp. It was Franklin Parry, hatless, and in the oldest of clothes. He looked more human than Culver had ever seen him. There was colour in his cheeks, a healthy tan was replacing the sere and sallow tint. His queer, pale eyes were more expressive: they twinkled, as if conscious of his own disgraceful appearance, his hair was tousled and matted, and looked hardly yet dry from the sea.

"Good Lord! Parry, you look fit," Culver said, in genuine amazement.

"A great spot this," Parry laughed. "I like it better than Oldford. So well indeed that I've taken a cottage here. That's the shack." He pointed to a squat, tarred building between the road and the beach; an untidy-looking place, with a rough fence dividing its tiny, sterile garden from the common land.

A footpath led to it, across the heath, from where Parry had been lounging.

"Come on in," he said. "There's breakfast if you want it. Sea bass, caught 'em myself this morning. Oh, a great spot, Plomesgate." He chuckled.

"But damn it all, Parry, what's the game?" Culver asked, in perplexity.

"The game, old man? Just the same. Your pals at The Pines plus the amiable parson, now."

"But why this?" Culver indicated the cottage.

"Greater freedom of action. We don't want to alarm the quarry. But seriously," as he saw signs of

irritation showing in Culver's face, "I can work better away from Oldford. I've got a little car down here and a man to look after me, and there's some rather difficult work ahead—but you don't want to be bothered with that, do you? Anything happened since I left?"

Culver was not quite sure now whether he did want to be bothered or not. That was the infernal part of this business. Parry tantalised him. Culver was never certain whether he wanted him to help. He told the incident of the Ellenglazes, and Franklin Parry looked grave.

"What exactly did you tell her?" he asked tersely.

Culver racked his memory to recall every word, and Parry smiled with appreciation.

"Good man," he said. "Most judicious. A very wise move that, ragging the Gray girl—I like the missionary stuff." He grinned.

He was busying about in the cosy, cottage kitchen. The way he handled a frying-pan showed that he was no beginner as a cook. The fish sizzled and gave out an appetising smell.

"Shove the teapot over, will you?" he called. "Sorry it's such a scratch meal. My man's gone over to Oldford shopping. He will give us a real lunch—a great fellow as a cook. You must have met him on a bicycle; worried-looking chap. I cleared him out of the way so that we could have a talk."

Parry was a little vague about his man. "A good chap, used to be a steward on the Great Eastern boats," he said. He was vaguer still about his doings after leaving Oldford. He had already been in Plomesgate two days, he admitted.

"But didn't you go to Southsea?" Culver asked.

"Not within seventy miles of it."

"But your card?"

"That came from Southsea." Parry smiled enig-

matically. "Bit of local colour," he explained. "I'm never quite sure how much you're being watched. The Gray girl, perhaps. I fancy the fair Bill doesn't quite trust you—you were too inquisitive. And I don't want her to get curious about me. That's largely why I took this place. I got it from an Ipswich agent. Suitable place for an artist. I'm an artist! The village doesn't expect any sense from artists."

"Then, aren't you coming back to Oldford?"

"Not officially, old man. Certainly not with Lady Ellenglaze about."

Culver looked dubious.

"But how are you—or rather how am I going to explain it?" he asked.

"Don't," said Parry blandly. "If you're going to stay on, expect to hear from me every day. I'll give you quite a convincing tale on post cards. You can show 'em. You are going to stay on, I suppose?"

The question was too casual to be entirely disinterested. Culver hesitated, then blurted out in an injured tone:

"Do you want to get rid of me? Damned if I can make out what you're trying to get at."

Parry's eyebrows lifted quickly.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, in a restrained way.

"I'm sorry," Culver answered impulsively. "But the whole thing's got on my nerves. I don't like being made a cat's-paw. I'll clear out if you like. I'd rather, I think. It's a malodorous business, and I'm not at all sure you're right, after all. Elsa Mayer and Mingay may be wrong 'uns, but women like Mrs. Coke and—and Miss Gray—I mean it isn't reasonable, Parry. They couldn't live such double lives. Bill Coke's queer, I grant, but that miniature—if I was right, the odds are she's being exploited by the others. I've half a mind to go and face her with it frankly."

"Yes?" Parry had reverted to his old, expressionless self.

Culver went on, determined, now he had started, to state openly all the carking doubts and fears which oppressed him.

"Then Ann—Miss Gray." It was curious how he boggled over the name suddenly. "We know who she is—how in the name of—of heaven, earth, or hell can you imagine a girl like that would mix herself up in a filthy affair that would land her in quod? It's—it's—it's utter damned nonsense, man. She doesn't want money—she's rolling in it."

"Yes?" Again that passionless query.

"And the parson. Parry, parsons don't do these things—even the rotten ones. They've too much sense for one thing, even if you bar natural decency. I—I——" He found his fervour cooling in face of Parry's immobile, gelid challenge.

"Well, there it is," he finished weakly. "It may be your job to think the worst of everybody, but I've got to use my own common sense. I tell you, that dance at Mrs. Coke's shook me. She could not do it, Parry, if she were what—you—what I—thought."

Parry picked up a fork and drummed idly with it upon the table.

"Thanks, old man," he said, after a pause. "I'm glad you got it off your chest. Now wash out the women for the moment : women aren't logic ; let's start with the parson. You sure he's a parson?"

III

Culver flushed with humiliation. The implication was obvious.

"Well—I—I——" he began. "Well, we can easily settle it. There's Crockford."

"Oh, he's in Crockford all right, but not this

year. Nor for some time back. Then he crops up in the Appendix—‘Clergy who cannot be traced,’ you know. Half a moment——”

Parry disappeared. He was back in a minute, and he put a type-written sheet before Culver.

“There are the details,” he said quietly.

Culver read:

“‘Foster, Clement Henry. Trinity College, Cambridge. B.A., 1896. M.A., 1899. Deacon, 1898. Priest, 1899. Curate of Llanhurst, 1898-1901. Vicar of St. Crispin, Wandle End, 1901. Extract Crockford’s Clerical Directory, 1920. No reference since.’

“Well?” Culver said stupidly.

“How old would you guess our bird at Bidely?” Parry asked.

“I don’t know. Rising seventy.”

“Well, he ought to be about fifty-four or five.”

Culver glanced at the typescript. “That’s true,” he agreed unwillingly. “But some parsons take orders late in life.”

“I don’t think this one did.” Parry was emphatic. Culver frowned.

“Do you know for sure?” he asked.

“No. But I’d like to. My trouble is that I can’t be in two places at once. Llanhurst and Wandle End, even after twenty-five years, might tell us something of the Rev. Clement Foster. But Bidely’s more important. I wonder——”

Dick Culver fumbled for a cigarette. Parry’s suggestion was quite clear to him—he was asking him to go in search of the history of this mysterious Clement Foster. And, curiously enough, he wanted to go. Action appealed to him. It was this perpetual hanging about that got on his nerves.

And if what Parry suggested were true, Foster of Bidely must be an awful swine. At least, one was justified in unmasking a brute of that kind.

"Would it help?" he began.

Parry looked round sharply.

"Half a moment, old man," he interrupted. "Here's Harris back."

The latch of the kitchen door lifted, and a pale-faced, perspiring, little man appeared, a lock of fair hair straggling over his forehead.

"Beg pardon, sir," the little man said. "I didn't know you was in 'ere."

The Cockney voice sounded strangely out of place. Culver looked up, smiling at the incongruity of it.

"This is Harris," Parry announced solemnly. "Harris is supposed to look after me."

"I do me best, sir," the man said half resentfully. He dumped a basket of provisions on the floor and looked about him uncertainly.

"I'm sure he does," Culver put in. He liked this funny, serious, little man. "Harris, I'm afraid I've made more work for you." He nodded at the littered table.

Harris was tactful.

"No trouble, I'm sure," he said, in a friendly, intimate way. "But the governor will 'ave 'is little joke."

Parry laughed and pulled himself lazily to his feet.

"If you've finished, Culver, let's go out and contemplate the North Sea, ex-German Ocean," he suggested.

"Very much ex," Harris interposed cheerily. "Don't I know it!" His shrug was more expressive than many words. "Fifteen years of it, bar the perishing war. Mine-sweepin' then." He proceeded automatically to gather up the dishes, as though they were mines.

Parry led the way down to the beach.

"A comic cove, Harris," Culver commented, with a smile as they trudged over the rough shingle.

Parry beamed.

"Harris' experience of life is wide and his illusions negligible.

"How did you get hold of him?" Culver asked curiously.

Parry reverted to his faculty for convincing vagueness.

"Harris? Oh, he looks after me in Town, as a matter of fact. A priceless fellow. There's nothing he can't do but be respectful. He'll give you plenty of shocks if you see much of him. But he's got brains. A useful lad Mr. 'Arris."

They had reached the edge of the sea, a steep, shingle beach that ran north and south in a seemingly dead straight line. Parry lugged out his pipe and started to load it.

"As I was saying," he began thoughtfully, picking up the threads of their conversation before Harris' interruption, "I'd very much like to know a little more of the history of that reverend fraud at Bidely. Of course, he might be the same Clement Foster—parsons when they do go astray are apt to go the whole hog. But frankly I hope he isn't."

He struck a match and puffed noisily at his pipe. Culver played nervously with the pebbles, picking up a handful and letting them drift aimlessly through his fingers. He was still uncertain.

Then, with sudden decision, he said :

"Like me to go and find out?"

"Very much," Parry answered, with complete candour. "I couldn't very well ask you; but I hoped you would offer. It would be of enormous assistance. Would you go at once?"

Culver was taken aback by the directness of the answer. Parry fitted no type that he had ever met before. His queer blend of secretiveness and embarrass-

ing frankness was so hard to comprehend. But Culver preferred the frankness.

"Yes," he said. "But oughtn't we to put up some yarn for the benefit of Mrs. Coke—and the parson? Wouldn't it look fishy if I cleared off too suddenly?"

"Ye-es," Parry drawled. "There's a snag there. Wait a minute." He gazed dreamily out to sea. "You'd better—you'd better—I've got it. Drive a car?" he asked sharply.

"Yes."

"Then go and get it."

"But I haven't got one, man."

"Yes, you have." A slow smile lit up his face. "You have a Fowler saloon. You sent it to the works for a thorough overhaul when you went abroad. Now you're going to stay in Oldford you want it. And it's just about ready. So you're going up to the Fowler works in Warrington to drive her back. You find your pal Ann Gray this afternoon, and tell her that tale. It's a nice car, dark green, three years old, sluggish under forty, and a devil for hills."

"But—but how do I produce it—or don't I?" Culver demanded, in sheer amazement.

"You can produce it all right, old man," Parry said, his eyes twinkling again. "You can do your journey in it. I'll have it at Ely station for you tomorrow morning. Make a note of the number. Now listen, this is the scheme."

Culver listened for the best part of an hour.

CHAPTER XIV

I

By noon next day Dick Culver was in possession of a very fine Fowler; and Fowlers are among the luxury cars of the market.

He took over in an extraordinary manner in the Station Approach at Ely. The car was waiting there, a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. Culver came out of the station, a porter following with his suitcase.

The chauffeur seemed to recognise him at once. He jumped from his seat and touched his hat.

"You're from Mr. Frank, sir?" he said. He took the suitcase and stowed it away at the back.

Culver tipped the porter and turned to the chauffeur.

"Now I'm ready, Nash," he said. "Mr. Frank suggested you drive me as far as Cambridge so I can pick up the hang of the car, then you can get back."

"Very good, sir. I'll just take her out of the town." Nash was back in his seat, and Culver climbed in beside him. "She's quite easy, sir," the chauffeur went on, "the change——" He proceeded with technical details as they moved smoothly into the main road.

At Cambridge, Culver parted with the competent Nash and put the Fowler's nose westward, bound for the other side of England.

Parry really was uncanny. A man who could produce a fifteen-hundred-pound car at twenty-four hours' notice, and hand it over to an acquaintance of a few weeks without the least hesitation, wanted some explanation. Yet Franklin Parry had provided none.

"It'll be all right" was all he said about the car. "Nash knows."

But Ann, when Culver had found her, after an

hour's anxious loafing and two or three cocktails in the lounge hall of the Palace Hotel before dinner, was thrilled.

"A Fowler!" she had exclaimed enviously. "Oh, you lucky devil! Will you let me drive it? You can get ninety out of them. If you can't, I will."

He had told his story, and she had listened with peculiar interest. That it had convinced her, he had not the least doubt.

"And when will you be back?" she asked eagerly. "You are coming back?" Her voice changed to a slow, provocative drawl.

"Two or three days, I hope," he answered. "But you know what these people are. If I don't go for it, they'll waste weeks."

She pouted.

"Be quick," she urged. "Beth's coming next week. My measly cousin. She's stuffy, awfully stuffy, sometimes. She'll be the complete invalid I know. And I must try the Fowler. Bet you I can whack her up to eighty-one."

"I bet you don't," he said, "not with me in it. I saw you nearly hit a lorry yesterday. You're not going to do in my car like that."

"All right—snail," she laughed, and hurried away. Ann was dining at the Nonnarys with Bill that night. It was always with Bill, Culver thought savagely.

II

Culver was bound for Llanhurst, a village on the Hereford border of Wales, and the best part of a hundred and fifty mile run, as his map told him.

It was there that the Rev. Clement Foster had spent three years as a curate, according to Crockford, and there, although that curacy was a quarter of a

century ago, that Culver hoped to pick up some information. Memories were longer in remote country villages than in London suburbs, and Wandle End, Foster's last recorded cure, was one of the rawest of London suburbs: a place of acres of red brick terrace houses with a shifting artisan or clerkly population.

It was doubtful if anyone had lived for twenty years at Wandle End; and parsons were not known to many in such a community.

But now that he had started, Dick Culver was determined to thrash this matter out. There must be in existence many people who had known this Rev. Clement Foster, and Culver was going to find some, at least, of them.

It was a long and tiresome cross-country journey, but the Fowler did all she was advertised to do when she had a chance. And Culver pulled up before the Dragon, at Llanhurst, soon after six: climbing stiffly from his seat, in the garage, he walked out into the quiet village street and viewed Llanhurst with pleasure.

To the west, the great upstanding Radnorshire hills were lighted by the declining sun. They looked Scottish, he thought—there should be some trout and grouse up there. The street itself was amazingly picturesque, rich in half-timbered, black and white cottages, with the tall, graceful tower of the church at the end by the stream, and a ruined castle standing out just across the valley.

It was a mellower, kindlier country than the bleak East Coast, which he had left that morning. There was a moist, lazy, somnolent atmosphere about the place; a suggestion that time moved slowly in these Welsh marches. He was hopeful.

The Dragon was more than he had dared to expect;

a jolly, hospitable-looking, half-timbered house, with a little porch, and beyond, a hall panelled from floor to ceiling in rich, honey-coloured oak.

Clifford, the landlord, an elderly, brisk, and jovial man, was respectfully chatty. The Fowler had not failed to impress him, and he was plainly anxious to please this rich, chance customer. Clifford carried Culver's bag himself to his room, and asked what he would like for dinner.

Culver had knocked about in country inns a good deal, and was pessimistic from experience. Not what he would like, but what he could get, he knew would be the result.

The landlord suggested trout, and Culver gasped.

"And perhaps a nice partridge to follow, sir," he went on in his soft pleasing accent.

Dick Culver could have embraced him. He was ravenously hungry.

"Couldn't be better," he answered. "And the sooner the better."

Clifford glanced at a huge turnip of a watch.

"Say a quarter past seven, sir?" he suggested.

"Good man," said Culver with feeling.

Culver strolled, hatless, down the village street before dinner. The wind had dropped, and a faint mist was rising from the valley, and with it mingled the wood smoke of the cottages; the scent of the wood smoke, blended with the keen hill air, was like incense to Culver's nostrils. He walked as far as the church and gazed curiously at it. Had that rubicund, portly parson at Bidely Rectory ever served in this church? He tried to visualise him, nearly thirty years younger, slimmer, keen and newly ordained. It didn't seem possible.

Culver turned with a sigh and went back to the Dragon.

III

The dinner was perfect. Culver had the panelled coffee-room to himself, and he moved across to the open hearth where Clifford had lighted a little log fire—"to take the chill off the room," as he put it—and sipped his port in great contentment.

Even the problem he was trying to solve seemed less grim for the moment. Its ugly corners were rounded, its unwelcome possibilities capable of some, undefined explanation. Llanhurst, like some dear old maiden lady in an atmosphere of lavender and sweet woodruff, and the Clement Foster of Bidely, with his aura of crime and cunning, would not mingle.

The landlord came deferentially into the room to inquire if Culver had all he needed. Culver put his first question—he had to force himself to do so.

"Excellent. Excellent, thanks," he said. "A very cosy place you've got here—and a very charming village. Years ago I knew a parson you had here—a Mr. Foster—Clement Foster. He was curate for about three years. Do you remember him?"

Clifford cast his eyes to the beamed ceiling, thoughtfully.

"Foster—Foster. I recall the gentleman. A very nice gentleman, too. Walked with a limp. Hurt his leg at football. What happened to him, sir?" The landlord had become suddenly self-conscious. "He went up to London when he left us, and we did hear there was some trouble. I don't believe 'twas true. Not Mr. Foster."

Culver felt himself start. Here was the first, unwelcome confirmation. His Clement Foster certainly had no limp, now, nor did he look a one-time football player. But this talk of scandal.

He managed to answer with unconcern.

"I never heard anything about the trouble," he said. "I expect it was just gossip. So you liked him, eh?"

"Well, yes, sir." Clifford was still uneasy. "I never was much of a church-goer, I'll admit, but that didn't make no difference to Mr. Foster. I'm remembering him better now, sir." He smiled. "I'd just come here, then, from Leominster; that 'ud be—what? Best part of twenty-five year ago. I remember the curate coming into the bar one day and saying: 'I'd like to make our church as attractive as your bar.' Regular surprised the chaps, it did. He had his pint and went out, and they liked him for it. They often talks of that now in there." He indicated the bar parlour, from which there came the comfortable hum of conversation.

Culver lied glibly.

"Yes, that's just the sort of thing I should have expected of him," he said.

Clifford looked relieved.

"There's Jack Thomas in there now; he was there at the time. He could tell you more than I can. Jack used to sing in the choir."

Culver smiled.

"I'll come in in a few minutes," he said. "It sounds cosy."

He followed the landlord into the bar, shortly. It was a snug little room, a bit stuffy, and very smoky. Some half-dozen reputable-looking men—little tradesmen they seemed—were sitting over their evening beer. Their conversation slackened as Culver entered, and they looked up at him with respectful curiosity. But they replied to his "Good-evening," in a friendly enough way, and very quickly returned to their talk.

Culver went across to the bar and ordered himself a drink.

"In a moment or two you might get Jack Thomas

to have a word with me," he said to the landlord. "I don't want to intrude."

Clifford nodded, and Culver took a seat on a high-backed settle, a fine old piece of furniture, highly polished with years of use. It recalled Bill Coke to his memory. He could see this settle in her studio.

Presently the landlord beckoned to a little grey bearded man, with bright, dark eyes.

"Jack, you remember the Reverend Foster," he said as the man came across the sanded floor.

"Reverend Foster? I remember him well. Nice gentleman." There was an unmistakable touch of the Welshman in Thomas' voice.

"Gentleman here was asking about him. He knows him."

"Indeed you do?" said Thomas with interest. "Where would he be now, sir?"

Culver was vague. He had met him in London some years ago, he explained. Would Mr. Thomas have a drink?

Jack Thomas chose what was apparently a local tipple, whisky and beer, and very willingly entered upon rather inconsequent memories of "the Reverend Foster," interspersed with deprecatory comments upon the present vicar, a rather sour ritualist, it seemed, who was not too well loved by the parishioners of Llanhurst.

IV

Culver extracted many words, but little real information from Thomas. The man was the local tailor, garrulous, but a trifle suspicious of the stranger.

He told long-winded, pointless anecdotes. Reverend Foster had married his daughter Annie to Ben George. Followed the life history of Annie. He recalled once when Reverend Foster had torn his

trousers on a fence—and many minutes were occupied in the details of how the curate had stood joking in the tailor's shop while the repairs were effected.

Culver was very patient, and he did learn definitely that Foster's limp was no passing disability. "Broke his heart that he'd never play football again," Thomas said. And Foster was described as a tall, muscular man, a bachelor, and a great singer. That appealed to the tailor. But further details were hard to get.

His vicar of the time had died long since, but the old Rector of Moreton, a few miles away, would remember him.

Culver went over to Moreton the next day, only to find that the rector was away on holiday. He had a few casual words with the Vicar of Llanhurst, too, but that gaunt zealot had never heard of Clement Foster. The verger of the church recalled him vaguely, and hinted again that there had been trouble up in London. But details he either would not or could not give.

His hope of finding a photograph of the curate in some group, perhaps, Culver found vain. And after nearly thirty years it was not surprising that memories of a young curate had worn very thin.

But what he had learned was most perplexing. Foster of Bidely did not fit at all the physical description of the curate of Llanhurst. The old man was on the tall side, and the flesh of years tended to disguise that. The limp, too, might have passed, but certainly he seemed too old.

Yet that hinted scandal. That fitted. And the genial manner might well be the ripening of the boisterous cheeriness for which Foster was remembered in Llanhurst.

A little discouraged, Culver set out for London on the second morning. If a remote and conservative

community like Llanhurst could produce so little, there was not much hope of better success in a restless, modern London suburb.

Culver stayed at his club that night. The place was just reopened after the annual cleaning, and the members were delighted to be home again. He welcomed the merry crowd in the smoke-room; they helped to divert him for a time.

Franklin Parry came through on the telephone soon after ten. Culver was playing bridge at the time. He had wired Parry from Hereford on his journey—they had arranged to keep in touch in that way—and Culver, from the trunk box in the hall of the club, had a long conversation.

Parry was by no means discouraged. The scandal rumour interested him particularly. "Sounds very promising," he said. "When you go down to the other church, go for the women, old man. Find a nice, soured, professional church-worker. They never forget scandals about vicars, all their lives. You'll have good hunting to-morrow." His cynical laugh came over the wire.

But to Culver's inquiry of how things were going at his end, Parry gave a non-committal: "Moving. Nothing wonderful, but moving." And before he rang off he urged Culver not to hurry.

"Take your time. You can't rush these things. It may take you a week, but it'll be worth it. Right you are, then, I'll give you a ring about the same time to-morrow."

Dick Culver felt that it was rather unsatisfactory: rather as if Parry were keeping him amused. He didn't really seem to care a hoot whether he found out anything or not.

He went back to the card room and finished his rubber.

CHAPTER XV

I

OFFICIALLY, the Spratboat at Plomesgate was closed. Its few customers had shuffled out into the still, autumn night some time before, but Jim Chantrey, the landlord, offered no objection to Franklin Parry's suggestion of "a nightcap each," as he came out of the cosy parlour where he had been telephoning.

Jim poured out a couple of generous whiskies.

"Take it all out of that, the call to London and the drinks, Mr. Chantrey," Parry said, throwing a note on the table.

Mr. Chantrey took it, fumbling deliberately at the till. He liked being called Mr. Chantrey by this artist gentleman. He was queer, of course, but not quite so queer as most of the visitors. "More of a real gentleman, in his way," Jim thought. "Had his own servant, too, that funny chap that talked so comical. Amusing chap that, for a Londoner. And open-handed.

Mr. Chantrey passed over the change and announced that it was a dark night.

"Gettin' cold, too," he stated, rubbing his hands. "I was out about five o'clock time this mornin' and there were a frost."

Parry hinted with interest that winter was approaching, and they talked weather with great seriousness.

Mr. Chantrey was proud of his telephone. It was the only one between Oldford and Street. Wasn't often it was used to London, it was true, but Mr. Parry had no idea the funny calls he had on it. He told stories of wrecks.

"Well, I'm coming in again to-morrow night," Parry said, finishing his drink. "Helps me keep in touch with my business. Good-night, Mr. Chantrey."

He groped his way out into the keen night. It was black as the pit, with a white mist rising from the ground. A few yards along the road a silent figure joined him from the darkness of the common.

"Just hit it off nicely," said Harris' genial voice. "Here's your coat, you'll want it. But the night's right." There was only a trace of the cockney in his accent now, a rather harsh, metallic tone, rather like a sergeant-major's. And his manner was that of easy equality.

"Good man," Franklin Parry answered, pulling on the coat. "Gad, but it's chilly. Got the flask?"

"Have I not?" Mr. Harris chuckled knowingly. "And won't we be glad of it?"

They struck out diagonally across the heath. "Look out for rabbit holes," Harris warned. "Rough going for a bit, Mr. Parry."

Parry, stumbling, agreed. "Damned rough. Better not use a torch just yet, I suppose?"

"Just as well not. Mr. Culver got any news?"

"Yes and no," Parry answered in a puzzled voice. "He's got on to a rumour of a scandal about this Clement Foster, but where it will lead to I don't know. Hear more to-morrow, I hope." Parry elaborated.

"We don't want him back too soon, Mr. Parry," Harris said from the darkness.

"I know, I know. I suggested that, but one can't do more. He's an impulsive man, you know. And no fool. I've had the devil's time with him. I've nearly lost him twice."

"Means well, but a nuisance," Harris commented calmly. "I know 'em. Hope he won't raise a hare to startle the old bird up at Bidely. I bet he's got eyes."

But it's a neat game. Oh, he gets marks for brains." Harris was frankly appreciative.

"If he is our pal—he naturally would," Parry retorted with decision.

"You're right there," answered Harris.

They trudged on for the best part of half an hour. Once well away from the road, they produced torches, which made the going easier. The air thickened as they dropped down towards the marshes of the Oldford river. The mist was white and cottony here, and, crossing one field, Parry blundered into a flock of sheep.

"A bit too thick, I'm afraid," he said. "If this doesn't clear there'll be nothing doing."

Harris grunted. But he was a good guide; he seemed to know every inch of the path, and the final few hundred yards, across open saltings, was the hardest going of the journey. Harris gave a sigh of relief as he came to the water's edge.

"Well, I've done it," he said with satisfaction. "Now it's your job, Mr. Parry."

Parry looked at the slim duck-punt at his feet. "Right. In you get," he said. Then he laughed softly. "Where'd you pinch it, Harris?" he asked.

Harris was tucking himself up on the floor-boards by the bows.

"Belongs to a London gentleman," he answered solemnly. "It's kept at Pryke. That's about half a mile up that way. I borrowed it, and a 'ell of a time I had gettin' it here too. We'll have to put it back before daylight, Mr. Parry."

"We will—if we get back," Parry laughed. He shoved off into a narrow creek amid a misty waste of mud-flats, over which the flood-tide was advancing steadily.

II

Parry handled the paddles with skill. Squatting on the floor at the stern, he drove the punt along at a good pace, hugging the Plomesgate shore to cheat the tide, and avoiding the shallow flats with a good deal of luck.

Only once did they go aground badly, and then but for a few minutes before the tide floated them again. But in those few minutes Parry's longed-for breeze came, in weak, puny puffs at first, swirling the white mist about like smoke, then stronger and keen from the coast, clearing it altogether.

"Good omen," he said softly to the man in the bows.

Harris answered with a low chuckle: "Bit parky, though. Half a moment, Mr. Parry. Let's have a look and see where we are."

He twisted himself round and peered across the river. Only an odd light or two showed ahead, where Oldford had already gone to bed. Overhead the stars were shining, now, with amazing brilliance. And the stillness was awe-inspiring.

There was the soothing flap of the water against the punt's timbers, and the low, restless rumble of surf on the distant beach; otherwise, only the occasional cry of a wild bird or the faint, far-off barking of a dog disturbed the night.

Presently Harris whispered: "I've got it. Might shove her across now; keep a bit to the right."

Parry obeyed without question. He put the punt's nose straight across the river and paddled vigorously. Harris guided him like a pilot, and they crept up under the farther bank until they came to a little bay where half a dozen punts and dinghies were moored,

lifting and splashing as the tide stole in to set them afloat.

Parry manœuvred into the midst of this fleet, and Harris, on his knees, grabbed the side of a white boat and tied up.

"Now we're safe for a couple of hours," he said. "What about the flask, Mr. Parry?"

Parry murmured, "Good man," and soon the scent of hot coffee mingled with the salt air.

It was noisy in their little haven; the boats creaked and chattered as the tide rose higher and higher and they tugged at their moorings. The strengthening breeze had set up a popple on the water that kept up a splashing accompaniment to the creaking song of the boats.

Parry and Harris climbed into the white boat and crouched down under her gunwale for shelter and secrecy. They spoke very little, and hardly moved, save to sit up abruptly every now and again, their ears strained intently in listening.

An hour passed, and Parry began to swear mildly with impatience. He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Nearly one," he whispered. "If they're not along soon we shall have to chuck it."

Harris growled: "I made sure it would be tonight, with the tide what it is. They can't have gone up the other bank, can they?"

Parry had no suggestion to offer, and the tedious watch went on.

Ten minutes dragged itself away before Parry suddenly stretched out and gripped his companion's arm.

"Listen," he said. "There's something moving."

Very cautiously Harris raised his head above the gunwale.

“That’s right,” he whispered. “And they’re coming up stream, too. That’s funny.”

Faintly from the darkness came the soft splash of oars; more faintly just ahead of them a dark blur came in view, low on the water and indistinct—a duck-punt, like their own, moving up stream.

It faded, swallowed up in the shadow of the bank, then passed from sound and view.

Harris said eagerly :

“You’d better land me, Mr. Parry. I’ll get along better on shore. If it is them, I’ll be up at Bidely before they’re there. I can get on to the road in about five minutes; there’s a path.”

They scrambled back into the punt, and Harris splashed through the muddy fringe of the river to the sea-wall.

“I’ll get back as soon as I can. You know where to put the punt?” he called back cautiously.

“I know. Good luck,” Parry answered as he shoved off and made his way into the main stream. He let his little craft drift most of the way. Time did not matter now, and noise was to be avoided.

As he neared Pryke he edged the punt close into the bank. Neither sound nor light came from the sleeping village. But for a denser blackness from its encircling trees there might have been no Pryke. Parry found the landing-place Harris had indicated and pulled the punt ashore. Then he set out to tramp back to Plomesgate across the bleak and deserted common.

III

Mr. Harris had made himself amazingly conversant with the country round about Bidely since he had been in the neighbourhood. He knew its footpaths as well as most of the natives, and at the cottage at

Plomesgate there was a large-scale map, profusely annotated in red ink, with details, the result of Mr. Harris' innocent walks in the district.

Likely clumps of gorse, cattle sheds, even ditches that would provide shelter from observation, were marked there. Red crosses in various places indicated watchful, vocal dogs; other mysterious signs refreshed Mr. Harris' memory of things to be avoided by one who wished to ramble this country unnoticed. And for hours the man would sit studying this map, committing its every detail to memory. And Harris' memory was no ordinary one.

He had cut through the blackness, across a marshy field, straight to the road, after he had left Parry, moving with ease and assurance. The road was a by one that led from Oldford, past The Pines, to Bidely village, where it joined the Salthithe road by the bridge over the river. Mr. Harris took this road at a fair pace, keeping to its grassy sides as far as possible, and interrupted in his journey only once.

That was when the measured tramp of a rural policeman sounded ahead. Mr. Harris swung himself over a gate and lay flat, close against the hedge, praying that the bobbie would have no dog with him.

His prayer was answered. The policeman went steadily by, humming "Valencia" and puffing contentedly at a forbidden pipe.

On the outskirts of Bidely, Mr. Harris turned sharply to the left, crossed a couple of fields, and found the brackish marsh that edges the river. Under the wall, which saves the marsh from flood at spring tides, Mr. Harris wormed his way backwards a little; then, crawling up the wet, grassy bank, he lay flat on the earth and listened.

From his lookout he could discern a lonely cottage built under the wall on the land side. Mr. Harris'

head, peering so very carefully over the bank, bobbed down suddenly at the sound of someone moving by the river. He shifted position, silently, to a safer distance; then, like a snake, crawled up until he could see.

A duck-punt had just landed, and a man was bending over it lifting some heavy object from the bottom boards. Harris could hear him grunt with the effort. Then there was the rattle of rope, a slow, steady tramp, and the man's figure appeared for a moment against the skyline, a square package on his shoulder. He scrambled down the wall and went towards the cottage.

Mr. Harris followed discreetly.

The man did not linger long. Harris judged he had gone in for a drink, and envied him, for he was squirming, belly to earth, like the serpent, in the long, mist-soaked grass of the marsh not fifty yards away, and he was muddy and chilled, and impatient.

He saw the fellow's dark form emerge, saw him hoist his heavy burden to an easier position on his shoulder, then set off to the right, away from the village.

Harris frowned as he tried to visualise the map. He could recall no field path that way, and he hardly dared risk following over an unknown marshy field. He took a chance, cut back and joined the road, sinking again into hiding at its junction with the sandy lane that led up to Bidely Church.

The vigil was short this time. Harris had found a clump of heather, dry and comfortable after the muddy grass in which he had been lying, and he had hardly settled down before his sharp ears caught a faint sound in the distance.

Somebody not far away was breathing hard, and he was crossing the open heath; Harris could hear the

swish of his feet as he tramped through the rough ground. He had a bad few seconds as the footsteps drew nearer. The man passed within a dozen yards of him, his head bent to the earth, picking his way.

Then followed as cunning a bit of tracking as could be devised by the keenest scout. Up that road, along which but so short a time before he had plodded so wearily through the heat, Mr. Harris squirmed his way from bush to bush, now hurrying, bent almost double across a more open tract, now lying breathless behind a clump of gorse, always just near enough to his man to keep him in view, always ready to drop at the first sign of alarm.

Harris was exultant. He had proved his theory—almost. He took another chance and swung far out into the heath to get ahead of his slowly plodding quarry, then turned inward and found a safe shelter in the dense shadow of a great yew in the churchyard.

A moment or two later a soft voice from the darkness by the church whispered through the night :

“Here I am. You’ve done it all right, then.”

A grumbling voice answered :

“Here, you take it for a bit ; it’s damned near broke my back. Next time we both go.”

Harris saw a light flash for a moment. It showed up the rubicund face of the supposed invalid, Clement Foster. The light vanished, and the two voices grew dim. Then a door opened, and Mr. Harris sighed with relief. His job was done for the time being.

IV

In the kitchen of Beach Cottage, in the yellow light of the oil-lamp, Mr. Harris appeared, as he himself described it, after one glance at the dresser mirror, “a fair sight, and no mistake.”

His face was streaked with mud, that unruly Napoleonic lock of hair was matted, his clothes were soiled beyond description. Grass and leaves and bits of heather and gorse stuck to him in odd places, giving him something of the appearance of a dejected scarecrow.

Franklin Parry laughed openly.

"My hat! Harris, you are in a state," he said. "But cheer up, old man. I've got a bit of food for you here. Better call it breakfast; it's just on four o'clock."

Harris dropped wearily into a chair.

"It wasn't too easy, I will say," he answered with a touch of pride. "But it was worth it, Mr. Parry. I was right. They are using the church. And that cunning old fox, Foster, was there too. But it's neat. Oh, it's neat. And so simple."

He took a cigarette from a paper packet and lit it with relish.

"But what is it?" Parry asked anxiously, pouring out a cup of steaming coffee. "That beats me. Why all this elaborate trouble? And if they've got it in the church, they've got to get it away again. Has Bill Coke tumbled? Is she getting rid of stuff?"

Harris gulped his coffee.

"One thing at a time, Mr. Parry," he said. "Something is in that church now. If we can get an idea what it is, we can get inside their brains again."

CHAPTER XVI

I

DICK CULVER went to Wandle End directly after breakfast the next morning. He was frankly pessimistic as he sat on the motor-bus which took him through miles of soulless London suburbs. He wondered what Parry was up to at that moment, what he was hiding from him.

Wandle End was the bus terminus. The cumbrous vehicle jolted itself round into the open space in front of a modern public-house that bore the sign of the Cape Arms, and Culver descended, lost for the moment as to what to do next.

The suburb was mechanical; its rows of red brick streets, all so much alike, looked as if they had been stamped out, by the mile, by some Gargantuan building machine. Yet their little front gardens gave one redeeming touch of Nature. They were gay with Michaelmas daisies and golden rod, and here and there ragged clumps of chrysanthemums.

Culver inquired of a bus-driver for St. Crispin's. The man called to a loafer outside the public-house: "What church is St. Crispin's, Joe?"

Joe thought it was the big church past the Broadway, and Culver walked off in the direction indicated, to find himself in an even drearier part of Wandle End.

St. Crispin's, when he found it, was set back from the main road, a gaunt barn of a church, in yellow brick, with shabby stone facings, as featureless and ugly as St. Peter's of Llanhurst was beautiful.

It looked about thirty years old, but was not yet finished. The transepts were lacking, and the gaping holes in the nave wall, from which they were, some-

time, to be extended, were boarded up. There was a crazy little bell-cote over the western gable with a bell that Culver was sure would be irritatingly thin and harsh.

A pathetic effort had been made to do something with the garden which surrounded the building; but the grass badly needed cutting, and climbing nasturtiums rambled aimlessly about amid ragged bushes of phlox.

Culver studied the blistered notice-board. The vicar, he learned, was the Rev. Stuart Weston, M.A., and the vicarage in Geraldine Road. He read the long list of services, trying to make up his mind how best to proceed. A direct call on the vicar was clearly the first thing to do; but what explanation should he offer him?

He scanned, idly, a bill announcing a Sale of Work for the organ fund, and gathered from this that the vicar was married, since Mrs. Stuart Weston and Miss Adelaide Cupper were in charge of the White Elephant Stall. Why was it, he asked himself, that church-workers always had such distinctive names? He recalled Parry's suggestion to find an ardent church-worker, and smiled grimly.

But he could not stand there for ever in the mellow, misty sunshine. Better try the church first. He pushed open an ill-fitting iron gate, from which the paint was rapidly flaking, and crunched his way along the gravel to the door.

To his surprise it was open, and to his greater surprise the church, when he entered it, was not nearly so barren as its exterior had suggested. The Rev. Stuart Weston must be a man of taste, he reflected.

There was a faded, elderly woman in the chancel, attending to the flowers. She glanced up as he entered, and went on with her task.

Culver waited until she returned to the vestry, then followed her. This would be Mrs. Weston, perhaps.

"Excuse me," he began, standing at the door, "but can you tell me if the vicar will be here this morning—or—or where I could find him?"

The faded lady's voice was crisp and detached.

"He should be," she said. "He generally comes in about twelve. I'm expecting him."

"Thank you," Culver answered. "Then I'll wait. And may I leave this card here for him, that he may see it when he comes in? Perhaps you'd be kind enough to say that I'm here."

The faded lady took the card gingerly between two moist fingers and turned on a queer, mechanical smile.

"I'll tell him," she said, and Culver went back into the church and sat meditating in a pew. The faded lady flitted in and out of the church with her vases, and presently the hushed rumble of voices from the vestry indicated the arrival of the vicar by some other door. A moment later he came into the church and looked towards Culver.

Culver went forward. The parson, he noticed, was a tall, dark, pleasant-looking man; youngish and active, and with a friendly smile.

"You want to see me?" he asked simply.

"Just for a few minutes," Culver answered.

"Come along in, then." He led the way into an inner vestry. "Topping day, isn't it?" he said. "Makes you want to be in the country. I'm only just back, and I haven't trained my neck to the yoke yet."

He laughed easily, and Culver liked him instinctively.

"Now then, Mr.—Culver," he went on, glancing at the card, "what can I do for you?"

Even at that moment, Culver had no clear idea of his line of attack, but the vicar's manner encouraged

him to be franker than he intended. He summed the man up quickly. He was human and sincere, and not the sort of man to be easily gulled. An unconvincing lie would probably result in the teller being shown quickly and politely out. He decided not to lie.

"I want to know something about a predecessor of yours," he began. Weston's dark eyes hardened a little, and fixed themselves upon his visitor. "A Mr. Clement Foster," Culver continued, rather ill at ease. "He was here in 1901, and he came from Herefordshire, Llanhurst."

"Yes. I know of him. He was the second vicar of this church. But what do you want me to tell you?"

The direct question was awkward. Culver hesitated a moment.

"Can you tell me where he went to when he left here? I—I'm rather anxious to get in touch with him."

The vicar swung round in his chair and grabbed a Crockford.

"I can't," he said. "Perhaps this can."

Culver interrupted him.

"No. I've looked there," he answered. "There's no record of him after this parish."

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you," Weston said blandly. "I've only been here seven months myself, and in Foster's time I was fourteen years old." He smiled whimsically. "And had never heard of Wandle End."

"I wonder," Culver went on, "if there are any of your parishioners who would remember him?"

"I dare say a few. Fulham, my verger, might. He's been here since the church was built. But Fulham's on holiday, and I'm my own verger."

"Would there be a photograph, do you think? In the Parish Magazine, or a group——"

"I'm afraid not. The magazine's only a few years

old, and I know of no group." The faded lady had come into the outer vestry, busying herself noisily with a water-can. "Of course, I'll inquire for you if—if you'll tell me frankly why you want to know, Mr. Culver."

Culver looked up quickly to meet the vicar's level gaze. He was certain then that Stuart Weston knew something of Clement Foster's story, and as certain that nothing but sheer candour would enlist his help. He answered the vicar's question in a tone as incisive and sharp.

"I speak to you as a priest?" he asked in question.

"Certainly," Weston bowed gravely.

"I have only too good reason to believe that Clement Foster, or someone using his name, is engaged in some very crooked business. I can do nothing till I know more, and I'm afraid I can tell you no more at present. That's my reason, Mr. Weston. You have my name before you. If you like you can satisfy yourself that I am who I profess to be——"

"No. No. That's quite enough. I know who you are—I read novels—you know." Weston's smile was very human, and Culver was appreciative of the graceful compliment. "But when jobs are unpleasant I like to get down to facts as soon as possible. You want to know something of poor Foster. Well, all I can tell you is hearsay, and it's peculiarly unpleasant hearing. The poor devil was accused of theft—but how far he was guilty or not is not for us to judge."

II

An expression of real pain came into the parson's dark face. Culver shared that pain. This seemed definitely to confirm his worst fears. Clement Foster

of Bidely, then, was the same man. And his fall had been permanent.

"It's a bad business," he said. "I wonder if you'd tell me all you know. I've got to do something. This man is still at the same game. It's pretty tragic, isn't it?"

"Oh—damnable!" the vicar commented frankly. "And the man seemed such a decent fellow, too, from all I've heard. Popular, played Rugger until he got smashed up. . . . I don't know. . . . I suppose it's like cancer, a disease. Is the man really past helping?"

"I'm afraid so. It's a really bad case. I suppose it must be the same man? Could anyone describe him to me?"

The vicar frowned.

"There's Miss Cupper," he said. "If she would. She knew all about it, and adored Foster. To this day she swears it was a mistake. I'll try her, but she's difficult." He indicated that Miss Cupper was the faded lady. "May I hint—just a little of what you've told me?"

Culver trusted his man. After all, it could do no serious harm.

"If you think it wise," he answered.

The faded lady came back into the outer vestry. Noises told that she was "tidying up." Weston raised his voice in a boyish way.

"Oh, Miss Cupper," he called.

Miss Cupper appeared at the inner door pulling on her gloves. Her costume was a timid imitation of the vogue of the moment: she evidently aspired to keep smart, but lacked courage. Her faded hair was unshorn, but was dressed to appear short: her hat, which should have been pulled well down on her head, sat foolishly in the air. Her skirt came well below the knees, and her stockings were of demure grey. But

she had been pretty once, Culver realised, though her face was thin and drawn, and her pale lips peevish in repose. Her big blue eyes were still expressive: there was the fire of the zealot in them.

"Did you call, Mr. Weston?" she asked, with a faintly suspicious side-glance at Culver.

"I did," the parson responded lightly. "Miss Cupper, it was Mr. Foster who limped and had the fair hair, wasn't it? Or was that Mr. Yardley?"

Miss Cupper's lips tightened.

"Mr. Foster was lame, but he was dark," she said primly.

"Ah, that was it, was it? Mr. Culver was asking. He thinks he met him not long ago. Your man was dark, was he, Culver?"

Culver nodded. "A round-faced, genial man, rather portly," he added. "With a weakish heart and a pleasant voice."

Miss Cupper listened avidly.

"He's been schoolmastering for some years," Culver went on, "but he's retired now."

"And where did you meet him?" Miss Cupper demanded seriously.

"Er—at the seaside," Culver said vaguely.

Weston noticed the hesitation, and jumped in quickly.

"Haven't you a photograph of Mr. Foster?" he asked innocently.

Miss Cupper's mouth shut firmly. She looked from one to the other, then announced definitely:

"No, Mr. Weston. I have not," and a faint flush coloured her faded cheeks.

"I thought perhaps you had," he said. "But it's a long time since his day. So he's retired, you say, Culver?"

Miss Cupper was agitated. She made as if to speak,

checked, flushed still deeper, then burst out in indignation.

"I don't believe a word of it. You've been talking scandal, you two. And you ought to be ashamed. There's not a word of truth in that—that"—she tried to find a word strong enough—"nasty story," she went on weakly. "Mr. Foster was an honourable, Christian gentleman, and those who say otherwise are—are—wicked."

"Come, come, Miss Cupper," the vicar put in provocatively.

"I'll not, Mr. Weston," she reproved him. "I'll not hear a word against Mr. Foster, and if Mr. Culver is sneaking round trying to find out things, I'm ashamed of him. Poor Mr. Foster, he's had his cross to bear. That woman——" She tried to swallow the last words, and blushed so deeply that she looked almost pretty again. "That's all I have to say about it," she finished, in an acid tone. "Good-morning, Mr. Weston."

III

The vicar looked at Culver and raised his eyebrows.

"I was afraid so," he commented dryly. "I've known her do it before. She's amazingly loyal."

"But what woman does she mean?" Culver asked.

"Mrs. Foster: the wife." He shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "I'm afraid there is some very human jealousy in that otherwise Christian heart. We parsons see a lot of that sort of thing."

Dick Culver was frowning. He had not associated a wife with the Rev. Clement Foster.

"Who was she—the wife?" he asked thoughtfully. Weston shrugged his shoulders again.

"That's another part of the tragic story," he said. "There was trouble there; they didn't get on happily,

so I'm told. She was younger than he, and never ought to have married him. She seems to have hated the humdrum life of the parish—she was always in Town. For weeks on end she never showed herself here, I've heard. A pretty woman; now I can lay hands on her photograph—but that won't help you."

"It might." Culver was curiously restrained. "I'd like to see it, anyhow. But what was the scandal—may I——? Do you feel you can tell me? It's a really serious matter."

"I'll tell you all I know," the vicar nodded, after a moment's thought. "I suppose—I suppose it's my duty."

The story he told was a tragic one.

Foster's wife was an extravagant, pleasure-loving woman, and kept her husband pitifully poor. He adored her, it appeared, and shut his eyes to all her failings. They had only been married a short time—married on his getting the Wandle End living worth a meagre £400 a year.

"The sad business happened at the Cape's place. That old house in the recreation ground now. I don't know if you noticed it as you came up."

Culver shook his head.

"Well, Wandle End was more country than town then. Cape made a fortune out of developing the suburb. He was a retired merchant, very rich, and I judge a bit vulgar. A dour Evangelical, but a good friend of this church—he built it and endowed it out of his own pocket. I don't speak slightly when I say he made a hobby of it. This church to him was everything.

"He was kind to Foster, but I imagine he thought him a little flippant for a parson; and he disapproved of the wife. However, Foster and his wife were dining with the Cape's one night, a big, ostentatious dinner-

party with the old man's silver plate scattered about—a regular Victorian feast. And Mrs. Foster went faint halfway through the dinner. She left the table to lie down, and presently Foster himself went to see how his wife was getting on.

“As far as I can gather he didn't come back for a bit, and old Mrs. Cape, a motherly body—she only died last year—she got worried and went to inquire if Mrs. Foster were seriously ill. As a matter of fact, she caught them both at the top of the stairs coming out of her bedroom—and there was a pearl necklace missing.”

“But do you mean to say they caught the two of them—red-handed?” Culver asked incredulously.

“It seems so. Though they never found the necklace.”

“But—but what did they say?”

“Foster—poor chap, put up a cock-and-bull story about hearing suspicious noises and going up to see. His wife bore him out. But it was too thin—much too thin. Then Cape went raving mad—you could hardly blame him. It was the disgrace on the church—his pet church—more than the loss of the jewellery, I honestly believe. He wouldn't prosecute—which was charitable of him—and they say he gave Foster a hundred pounds to clear out of the country. Anyhow, he resigned then and there, and had gone next day. And that's the story—as I know it—pretty rotten, isn't it?”

Culver bit his lip. It was rotten—a beastly story, the more so because he was becoming more and more convinced that Foster of Bidely was this same man. And it was loathly to think of a man like that still brazening about in parson's garb; still impudently using his own name twenty-five years afterwards. And how had he lived in the intervening years?

"Do many people know this story?" Culver demanded dully.

"Not the details. There are hardly any of them left in Wandle End who were here then. Vaguely, the story is known; people have a sad way of cherishing memories of a parson's faults." Weston sighed. "I used to hear bits of gossip when I first came, and I got all the facts I could in hopes of being able to combat the scandal. But it wasn't much use."

"Who did tell you?"

"Miss Cupper told my wife a bit. She was in the house at the time. Of course she swears that Foster told the truth, and she has poor old Cape in the nethermost hell now." He smiled sadly. "But mostly it comes from old Gissing; he was churchwarden at the time and a crony of Cape's. He was a doctor here for years, a regular nabob. Gissing's very funny about it—he quarrelled with Cape on the very point. For years they never spoke. Gissing's point of view is that Cape should have prosecuted in fairness to the man. He's a cynical old fellow—it's he who has the photograph."

"Could I see it—now?" Culver asked anxiously.

"Yes. We'll walk round there." The parson reached for his hat. "You can be quite frank with Gissing. He's just as safe as I am."

IV

Old Dr. Gissing was a curious man. He was over eighty, the parson said, but though he was wizened and frail, mentally he was extremely alert, and his humorous eyes suggested the perpetual enjoyment of some private joke.

Weston saw him alone first of all, and, when the two of them came into the old-fashioned drawing-

room where Culver was waiting, the doctor said shortly :

"You can ask the questions, Mr. Culver, I shan't ask any. I'm too old to want to learn any more."

They sat over some of the old man's excellent brown sherry while he bore out, and amplified slightly, Weston's story. He was inclined to go into detail, and he recalled the names of everybody at that portentous dinner-party.

"I think I'm the last, bar Foster, if your story's true. So it's a pity I'm not the last, eh? Like this sherry, Vicar? I bought it out of Cape's cellar."

Culver was anxious to know if anything had been heard of the Fosters after leaving Wandle End.

The doctor shook his head slowly.

"Gossip. Gossip. Nothing to go on. They said he went abroad—to America. Some said Africa. And I dare say it would have been Australia if they'd thought of it. There was a yarn that he'd gone to the Boer War. That sounded most likely; he was a plucky chap."

"And his wife?" Culver queried.

"Some said she divorced him. Others that they were never married. Which sex do you think that was, Vicar?" He chuckled. "But my own opinion is, he'd stick to her. Whatever else was wrong with him, he was fond of that woman. But you want to see her picture, don't you?" He got up and shuffled out of the room.

Culver's nerves were tense. He was developing a score of fleeting theories.

The doctor came back.

"Here it is," he said. "I kept it because of Winnie—my baby daughter." He indicated a pretty, fluffy-looking girl with her hair in pigtails, in the foreground of a casually arranged group.

The picture was an enlargement of a snap-shot. It showed three or four women on a tennis lawn, queer, antideluvian-looking females in flat, white hats and skirts down to the ground.

"Foster took it himself—out on the lawn there," the doctor explained, jerking his head towards the French window. "That is his missus, the one at the back. Pleasant enough looking girl, isn't she?"

Culver's eyes were fixed to the picture. The woman at the back was tall and slim and amazingly attractive, despite her old-fashioned costume. She was staring straight at the camera, with rather a superior smile on her face. Indeed, she looked superior; she was infinitely prettier and smarter than the others.

But what caused Culver to let out a sharp sigh of mingled amazement and satisfaction was that the smiling face of Mrs. Clement Foster was unmistakably that of Mrs. Wilfred Coke.

V

Bill Coke had waged her war against advancing years only too well. Here was the same face, younger, of course, and more feminine with its locks of dark hair dressed about the temples. The high collar and big sleeves gave her almost a mature appearance. Yet it was Bill Coke, in the early twenties, with those same steady, immensely confident eyes.

Questions crowded into Culver's brain. Were the two, husband and wife, still hunting together: still preying on society after a quarter of a century?

How, then, did Wilfred Coke come into it? Was the woman a bigamist? Or had she ever married Coke? Gissing had spoken of divorce—perhaps that explained it. And the two had come together again:

joined forces in common outlawry. The man had been devoted to her, the doctor had said. His one redeeming virtue, perhaps!

This settled it. This identified Clement Foster of Bidely and Bill Coke. There could be no doubt about it—the man older than she. Her fault, perhaps, but the result the same—a couple of cunning crooks up to some unknown mischief down at Oldford, as Parry had suggested. Associates of Elsa Mayer and Mingay—that pair from the underworld. And—and Ann Gray in that sordid galley somewhere. That hurt. Culver wished to heaven he could get on to Parry at once and tell him his discovery. Parry saw so infernally clearly in these matters; it was his trade. He would sort the thing out: put each piece into its proper place, dispassionately murmuring, “Don’t hurry, old man,” and puffing at his pipe. He must get hold of Parry quickly.

He found himself smiling conventionally, with instinctive caution, and desire to hide from his companions the significance of his discovery.

“Curious dresses. Hardly believable,” he was saying. “Gad! what sloppy freaks women did look then.”

Old Gissing, leaning over his shoulder, was thinking of his daughter.

“And Winnie’s got a girl of that age now,” he mused aloud. “Mother of four, my baby. And I’ll be hanged if she doesn’t look younger to-day than she does there.”

The Vicar joined them, gazing curiously at the group.

“I can vouch for that, doctor,” he said. “So that’s the unhappy Mrs. Foster! A bad business!”

“Did you ever hear anything about Foster’s people?” Culver asked abruptly.

Gissing screwed up his forehead.

"I don't remember," he answered. "He was pukka, right enough. I think he was a Northumbrian, but I can't be sure. He was a funny chap—unconventional. He never talked much about himself."

The doctor went back to memories of his own daughter, and Culver was glad to let the conversation drift that way. In a sense, he was staggered by his find, though he had surmised the possibility from the moment Weston had spoken of Mrs. Foster. The character fitted, so closely, Doreen's cruder summing up of Mrs. Coke. Yet he was shocked that this surmise had so quickly proved a just one. The idea was repugnant. One didn't like to accept the fact that human beings dropped so low.

The parson looked up suddenly at the clock.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "I shall get into trouble, it's after half-past one. Culver, you'd better come back with me and have lunch—and save me from the wrath of woman."

But Culver refused. He was in no mood for polite conversation with strangers, and when they parted, he was utterly sincere when he thanked Weston for his assistance.

The parson said gravely:

"Let me know, will you, if there's anything I can do—any chance to help."

"I will," Culver answered. "But I'm afraid this is—one of the bad debts."

PART II

CHAPTER XVII

I

THE mid-September nights grew cold after sundown, and this evening there was a restlessness in the air, like a vague boding from the north whispering that, despite the serenity of the mild autumn days, winter was watching.

The wind had risen late in the afternoon, and the surf was thundering on the shingle close to Beach Cottage at Plomesgate. Franklin Parry wandered out into the ragged garden and gazed through the fading light towards the road. Harris was late.

Angry clouds drifted across the flaming, sunset sky behind the village, and Parry shivered. There was rain coming with the wind, he reflected. The first of the equinoxials perhaps. He went back and stirred the fire to a blaze.

But it was nearly eight before Mr. Harris came wearily in. He looked worn out, his eyes were baggy and dark ringed, and his face appeared paler than usual. Parry looked at him, with unspoken inquiry, and Harris shook his head.

"No, not yet. They do take a devil of a time. And to-night would have been lovely. Black as your hat, too."

He flung himself into a chair, and lit a cigarette.

Mr. Harris, it seemed, had had a full day. He had been over to Bidely Church again, cementing his entente with Amos Gill and his mates. The picture had come out well enough, and he had taken over prints which had pleased the workmen immensely.

"But bar thanks, that's all I got, Mr. Parry," he said, with a grimace. "And I had a good look round, too. It's the tower if it's anywhere, I'll bet you. That's the one place I couldn't get a proper squint at. If only those keys had come."

He raised his hand with a gesture of complete disgust.

"Any chance to-morrow morning?" Parry asked.

"No. I got on the phone to the office. They swore they'd have them down by to-morrow night—but you know what they are. It's all right about the chauffeur, though; they've taped him."

"What, Ellis!" Parry spoke with excitement.

"Yes. He's Martingdale, the chap that was in the Graydon Hall affair I was telling you about. He comes from these parts; that's how he's got the accent so good."

"But—but he's employed by the real parson—Britain. At least so Foster said."

"That's all right. He's been here nearly six months. They've been preparing for this for a long time, you see. Mrs. Coke's been here what—four?"

"Very nearly. But I wonder how the devil they wangled Ellis in with Mr. Britain. Pity he's abroad. I'd like to know."

"And so would I," said Mr. Harris meaningly. "The Reverend Mr. Britain may or may not be all right. It looks funny to me."

"Come now, Harris. You can't have the whole lot of 'em crooked. Britain's all right—you know that well enough. Senile decay is the only thing wrong with him. He's just on eighty, and he's been here for forty years."

"I expect you're right," Mr. Harris agreed reluctantly. "But I never really trust anybody. My experience is——"

"I know your sour experience," Parry laughed. "But they hadn't identified Foster, I suppose?"

"No such luck," said Harris sadly. "It was a rotten picture I sent up. Best I could get though, and took me hours to get it. But, then, you see, no one really knows anything about Friend. There's the Chicago police. They reckon he was Sanders, the osteopath, but they're not sure. Then there's that line on him in Amsterdam, but I never set much store by that. No, Mr. Blooming Friend's the real goods. My word, Mr. Parry, if only we've got him! I admire him, mind you. Brains? He's got it there all right." Harris tapped his own bald temples, and brushed back the straggling lock of hair.

His tired eyes lighted up with keenness.

"Crumbs. But what a haul," he went on reflectively. "Friend, Mrs. Coke, Martingdale, and the rest of them all at once. Too good to be true, you know. Much too good." He rubbed his hands with cheerful anticipation. "Nothing from your end, I suppose?" he queried hopefully.

"No. I took your tip and did a bit of fishing in the river. Right off The Pines too. Got a few whiting and dabs, but the glasses showed nothing. The lady was playing tennis after tea. Regular crowd there. How she does it, I don't see. I mean she's got as decent a crowd of people about her as you'd find at a bishop's." Parry's voice was puzzled.

"And some wrong 'uns, too," said Mr. Harris. "Bluff. Sheer nerve. I give her marks too. But she must have been at it for years. When I think of the stuff that may have gone through that shop of hers in Kensington, right under our eyes, it makes me fairly savage, Mr. Parry. She's got it there too." Again the hand went up to the pallid forehead.

"Well, we've got to thank Mr. Culver for a good deal," Parry said.

"If Foster is Friend, I'll thank him all right," Harris grinned. "He can have the best meal on me that any man ever had. And you haven't disgraced yourself either. Pity you didn't start earlier, Mr. Parry. You'd have done well. You think quickly. That's the great thing. Get into their brains and think a second ahead of them."

Parry retorted grimly.

"And yet, for all we know, we don't know what they're after."

"No, but we will. That's where you do fall down. You're impatient. You've got to wait at this game. They've waited, haven't they? Started work on this job six months ago. Well, we've got to wait better still."

Harris spoke with the air of a tutor to a promising pupil. Parry nodded his acquiescence.

"But I sometimes think you're wrong," he said after a few moments. "Mr. Culver could be very useful to us. Frankly I think we'd be wise to tell him the whole story. He's straight enough."

"That's his trouble," Harris broke in cynically. "If he told a lie, no one would believe it. Look what he's given away to you."

"And look how he's helped!"

"Yes, but he didn't know it," Harris chuckled. "And he believes everything he's told. No, leave him out. Use him—yes. But tell him—nix."

Parry was not convinced.

"And one of these fine days you'll find he's suspicious of me and he'll go and give the whole show away to the police or to Mrs. Coke. He's got it there, too, Harris." Parry smilingly imitated Harris' gesture. "I believe he could be devilish useful with Foster—if we told him what to do. He's a simple, ingenious lad—but he's stubborn."

"Well, we'll wait," Harris answered, shelving the question. "I think I'll have a bit of supper and get to

bed. I'm tired. And to-morrow there may be a long night."

Parry went out with him into the kitchen, where the wind, straight off the sea, was howling and rattling the windows. Harris made himself a scratch meal of cold ham, then, admitting himself still hungry, cooked an omelette with the deft air of an expert.

Trying to lounge in a hard-seated, kitchen chair, Parry puffed at his calabash and listened while Harris reverted to his great obsession, the mysterious Friend. That was the man he most eagerly wished to lay by the heels. It was a matter of professional ambition with him. For some minutes he would be filled with optimism, then he would banish his hope, like a child afraid too freely to anticipate good fortune lest it never come.

"I don't know," he said. "Even if it is him, he'd be too smart to give us anything to lay hands on. He's deep—oh, damned deep—Friend! He sits outside it all, Mr. Parry. Lets the others do the work. Yet it's funny. He hasn't been heard of for months."

Harris glanced down at the littered table and cleared a space for his elbows.

"Of course, he'd be a bit hard up now, you know," he went on, speaking as of a casual acquaintance. "You see, he never got away with that Arnsberg stuff in Chicago. That's what makes me think he might have been Sanders. Sanders flitted about that same time. . . ."

Parry pulled at his pipe impassively. He, too, felt the fascination of this elusive Friend, this expert in art robberies known to the police of two continents by his pseudonym only—"A Friend," as captured, incriminating letters were signed.

Friend bought and sold and organised. Bought crookedly and sold crookedly, but his clients never gave him away. He had become a sort of myth, yet

the police knew him to be a very real person. They guessed shrewdly enough that the stolen Mabuse from the Count Van Gelde's house near Harlem had come into the possession of Benjamin Wisdom, the Seattle millionaire, via Friend, though Wisdom swore he had bought it openly from a dealer in Vienna, and the dealer bore out his story with a convincing one of its purchase, dirty and hardly recognisable, from a chance vendor.

True, the dealer disappeared soon afterwards, but nothing was ever proved.

"No, I believe we're nearer that chap than anyone's ever got," Harris reflected, with a determined nod. He brushed that foolish straggling lock of hair back over his forehead and seemed to try to plaster it down. It was a characteristic gesture of his when he was lost in thought.

"Let's hope so," Parry put in without expression. "Anyhow, it's a bit of luck it wasn't to-night we had to be out. Hear that?"

A wilder gust than usual shook the cottage and rattled the windows, filling the kitchen with a puff of acrid smoke.

"You're right," Harris agreed.

He sat pondering, elbows on table and head down-bent in moody meditation of the unwashed dishes, and that was how Dick Culver found them, master and man, hobnobbing in a littered kitchen. And he saw each jump to his feet in sudden surprise as he knocked on the kitchen door.

II

Culver had walked over from Salthitthe, and in the last couple of miles he was pretty nearly soaked to the skin.

To wait in London, inactive, until Parry should

telephone after ten o'clock that night, Culver had decided was too much for his patience. He dared not wire Parry openly; indeed, he was not sure that his friend was using his own name in Plomesgate, so he had driven down that afternoon and determined on Salthithe rather than Oldford as his stopping-place. It would be better to talk things over before he returned openly to the Blue Boar.

Culver had stumbled through the gale across the blackness of the open common, and gone, instinctively, to where a ray of light showed from the cottage window. And even then he was not quite sure that he found the right cottage. He had only been in Plomesgate once before.

But his glance, through a gap in the swinging curtains, showed him that he had come to the right place, though it filled him again with those former misgivings, that vague uncertainty of Franklin Parry's true part in this extraordinary affair.

Culver's bedraggled condition served well enough to disguise his apprehensions when Harris opened the door.

Parry had vanished. He had cut straight for the little parlour at the sound of a strange knock, and Harris was blandly inquiring.

Culver walked in, without invitation. He nodded to Harris and asked for "your master," as he put it in a subconscious effort to conceal his surprise.

Harris was splendid.

"Why! It's Mr. Culver," he grinned. "And not 'arf wet, neither. What 'ave you been doing, sir?" He raised his voice.

Franklin Parry came innocently from the further room.

"Hullo, old man," he said with genuine surprise. "What brings you here? Had a breakdown?" A quick lift of the eyebrows seemed to give Culver a cue.

"Yes—er—at Salthithe," he answered.

But Mr. Harris took the cue too.

"Them cars!" he said with sadness. "Looks like a 'ot drink is what you wants, sir."

Parry led Culver into the cottage parlour. A fire, just lighted and belching out clouds of smoke, confirmed his suspicions that the room had not been in use. Parry choked.

"Looks as if we shall have to sit in the kitchen while Harris attends to this," he said, with an uncertain laugh. "I was just telling Harris when you came—— But what's up, old man? Why this sudden appearance?" He looked up sharply.

Culver shivered and pulled off his light coat. Physical discomfort had got the better of suspicion for the moment.

"There's a most extraordinary development," he said, "but—I'm all for the kitchen first. I'm pretty wet. Clement Foster." He dropped his voice. "I've got his history. Bill Coke's his wife—or was once."

Parry rapped out: "What? Where'd you pick that up?"

"At Wandle End. The two of them were kicked out of there for stealing. Over twenty years ago. It didn't seem worth while waiting for you to ring up. It's a muddled story, and I want your advice. I'm at the Castle at Salthithe. I thought it better." Culver jerked out his phrases in staccato fashion.

Parry nodded gravely.

"Half a minute, old man," he said, and disappeared into the kitchen. Culver blinked at the smoky room, cursing the sluggish fire and the night, and wondering what this sudden action portended.

He heard muffled conversation in the adjoining room. He recognised Parry's voice speaking with level earnestness, then Harris breaking in with sharp, incisive question, and in a few minutes Parry was

back again with rather the air of a naughty child unrepentant of his naughtiness. He motioned Culver into the kitchen.

"Come on, old man," he said shamelessly. "I think the time's arrived to introduce you two. Mr. Leonard Harris, Pringle's star man in Europe—Mr. Richard Culver. Culver, Mr. Harris is peculiarly interested in the reverend gentleman. Let's hear the news."

"Your hot drink, Mr. Culver," said Harris, quite unmoved. He extended a steaming glass of grog. "And so Friend started life as a parson, did he? He's a nut, you know, Mr. Parry! What a touch! And easy too—drops into the patter at once."

"Friend!" Culver exclaimed blankly.

"Same fellow," Parry nodded, prodding at the calabash. "Harris will tell you. He's his hobby."

"But I'd like to hear your story first, Mr. Culver," Harris put in decisively.

III

There were times in the next couple of hours when Dick Culver felt that he was a criminal himself. Harris "put him through it," as he explained it apologetically, before he began. Harris cross-examined with the efficiency of a K.C. He checked and checked again each of Culver's statements; he went over dates and did what appeared to be sums, refreshing his memory from a notebook. His mild eyes glowed with simple wonder as he flung the most startling suggestions at Culver with a sharp "How's that fit your story?" or "That sound likely to you?"

Culver learned much of the history of Friend, in odd interpolations as the examination went on, and he found himself, before the end, tending to defend Clement Foster, and seeking to prove that the curate

of Llanhurst and the mild old man at Bidely could not be the utter scoundrel that this shadowy "A Friend" was known to be.

"Damn it all! I can't believe it," he said at length, turning to Parry for support. Parry had been listening in silence, a faint smile of interest, from time to time, lighting his straight mouth. "My man had some good in him. Yours" he nodded at Harris—"yours must have been born rotten."

"Sentiment, Mr. Culver—sentiment," Harris said reprovingly. "You must cut it out; it clouds the judgment. My experience is that, apart from business, the clever crook is a very agreeable person. He couldn't get away with it otherwise. Look at Mrs. Coke, now; the perfect lady. And ought to have been inside—that is, gaol, Mr. Culver—years ago."

"Still, I won't believe any man whose's once been a parson could have been such a swine as your man Friend," Culver maintained stubbornly. "The woman's a bad egg from the beginning. I got the impression that she was responsible for his fall."

Culver was tired and disappointed. His discovery had impressed and shocked him, and somehow he felt that it would have an important bearing upon the case, whatever it was, that Franklin Parry had in hand. But now it seemed that Parry was merely a secondary figure, an assistant, as it were, of this new man, Harris.

And they appeared, all the time, to be acting a part. That lie about Harris being Parry's man; Culver was certain that they would still have kept it up were they not pretty sure that they had been discovered. Culver felt that they were playing with him, treating him as a child, to be amused, but kept in the dark so far as real issues were concerned.

They were trying to side-track him now with their fantastic talk about this creature Friend, this lifelong

criminal with his legendary anonymity. Culver didn't care a rap for Friend. But he did want very much to know Mrs. Coke's story.

Here was something human, something that touched him. He knew Wilfred's tragedy and people who had been intimate with the Cokes. And, above all, there was that mysterious figure, Jean Malet, who had sent him to Mrs. Coke. When he put the question as to how Bill could have been married to Coke with Foster still alive, Harris had dismissed it as interesting but unessential, and Parry had offered no comment.

Rather peevishly he got up.

"Well, I've told you all I know," he said. "I'm fed up with the whole thing. I think I'll get off, Parry. I've a long walk ahead, and I can't be any more use to you people."

Parry was quick to notice the disgruntled tone, and his eyes flashed instant inquiry to Harris. Culver noticed the exchange of glances, and it fretted him, and Harris' conciliatory voice, so obviously insincere, irked him the more.

"Indeed you can, Mr. Culver," he began. "And believe me, I'm very grateful for what you have done."

"Well," Culver said boorishly, "what's the next move in fooling me?"

He was ashamed of the speech, but not sorry. His nerves had worn very thin, and this obviously put-up job between the two men was the last straw.

Parry pulled his pipe from his mouth with that determined movement that was sure indication of one of his rare expressions of emotion. "Look here, old man, don't say that," he answered, and there was sincerity in his voice.

But Culver was feeling savage.

"I do, and I mean it," he broke in. "Are you a

detective, or aren't you? And what's Harris? I've had enough of this fooling business. If you're honest, and want real help, you know I'm willing to give it. But if you're just taking me for a perfect damned fool, perhaps you're right up to this point, but from now on—you are wrong. I'll be my own detective, and maybe I'll find out a good deal more that way."

He went forward to get his coat, now dried by the fire, but Harris raised a hand, almost in parsonical manner, and checked him instinctively. Harris looked thoroughly worried, he noticed, and he was glad of it, but the next moment the extraordinary little man had surprised him out of his angry mood.

Very calmly he said :

"You're right. I'd have kicked, myself. Me, I'm Harris of Pringle's all right. And you—you're a newspaper man, aren't you, Mr. Culver? In the City once; then did a bit of painting before you took to writing. Made a bit on Kwaya rubbers and resigned your job. It's my business to know, you see—even more than you told Mr. Parry."

"Yes," Culver said frankly, amazed at this précis of his life.

Harris went on in the same bland way :

"Then, before you left Fleet Street you would remember the Carey Manor robbery—books you'll recall——"

"I remember," Culver interrupted. "I wrote a good deal about it. The library; there were two unknown Caxtons and some pictures, too, portraits. What's that got to do with it?"

Harris grinned.

"Ask Mr. Parry," he replied. "He owns them."

"But I'm of opinion Mrs. Coke or your parson could better tell me where they are," Parry put in bitterly.

IV

The story came back to Culver then, a robbery of the previous winter, one of a series of spectacular, country-house burglaries.

The Carey Manor affair had been rather swamped in the more sensational robbery that had succeeded it, when some fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery had been stolen from Lord Berford's place some thirty miles away. Jewels appealed to the public more than books, and Carey Manor was quite a small place, and its owner comparatively unknown.

The rumour of unrecorded Caxtons had attracted Culver, and fixed the incident in his memory.

"Carey Manor," he said. "But the owner was a woman. An old maiden lady, a Miss——"

"Gillot," Parry put in. "My aunt. She was over eighty. She died soon afterwards and left me the place. I was in the Congo at the time."

"But——" Culver demanded looking from one to the other at a loss to frame the dozen questions he wanted to ask.

Harris chuckled.

"Mr. Parry's mighty impatient," he explained. "Got fed up with the regular police and employed Pringle's. Got fed up with Pringle's and took a hand himself. He's accredited to us all right, and very well he's done, too."

Parry said, with a new gravity from which every trace of his old cynicism was lacking :

"The fact of the case, old man, is that the robbery at Carey killed old Miss Gillot. And the outrage of the whole business got me. Why the hell should a lot of foul, sneak thieves get stuff that has been in my mother's family for centuries? I'm used to getting things done, and, by God ! I'll have those swine some-

how—I may never get the stuff back ; but I'll get those who helped to steal it. I'm not poor—the old aunt didn't know how rich she was—and I'd as soon spend her money that way as in playing the country squire. She was a dear old thing. The only one in the family who didn't think I was a rotter. You recall Lady Ellenglaze's opinion of me? Maybe it is exaggerated, but there might have been cause. I did a bit overdo it as a youngster." He smiled reminiscently.

"But how do you know Bill Coke's mixed up in it?"

"I don't, old man. But I've got a very shrewd suspicion. You strengthened it. Your pal, Mingay, dealt in one of the pictures; I was after him in Antwerp—him and Elsa—until you led me back here. And we knew there was an English end."

"But surely if she is mixed up in it, she'd have tumbled to your name. She'd know, I suppose. It would make her suspicious, anyhow."

Parry nodded.

"I'm very much afraid of that," he said. "That's one of the reasons why I cleared out. And one reason why you'll be useful—if you want to be. I won't deny I've tried to sheer you off—lots of times. It wasn't that I was ungrateful, but you were dangerous——"

"Then why didn't you tell me the whole truth?" Culver asked frankly. "You might have known I was safe."

Parry looked across to the solemn Harris.

"I would have done, but my master wouldn't let me," he said, with a broad smile. "These professionals are so suspicious. Isn't that right, Harris?"

"Perfectly right," said Mr. Harris, with uncompromising candour.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

CULVER thoroughly enjoyed his first day back in Oldford. He felt a sense of adventure and a freedom from suspicion which he had not known for a long time.

The revelation of Parry's part in the game appealed to him. It was so sporting. And such a lot of things seemed clear now which before had been so unsatisfactory. There was a thrill, too, in being taken into the confidence of a man like Harris. Culver had almost adopted Harris' hobby—the elusive Friend.

Parry had given him a more or less definite job.

"Go back and cover my tracks, old man," he had said in his queer, emotionless way. "I'm in Town. Talk about me to Bill Coke. Be peevish, and say I'm messing up your holiday. Maybe she'll begin to ask questions. I'd like to know those questions. Take her out in the car if you can—it's yours to do what you like with. But keep off the parson."

And Culver, devising his own plan of campaign, had driven round in the Fowler to call on Mrs. Coke before lunch the next day.

He wanted to see her again for his own satisfaction. He wanted mentally to compare her with that photograph that Dr. Gissing had shown him. "The problem of the years between," as he called it to himself, was a fascinating one to ponder. Lord! What an amazing drama this woman must have played since that tragic night at the Cape's dinner-party at Wandle End.

An unfamiliar servant answered the door at The Pines, a gawky country girl. The opulence of the Fowler misled her. Culver she placed as one of the

rich customers who came from time to time to buy from "William Cook."

She spoke like a parrot repeating sounds rather than words.

"This way, sir. Madam is in the Gallery," she said, and Culver was taken straight through to Bill Coke's showroom.

She looked up as he entered, a furtive glance of question, it seemed to him, but it changed instantly to a friendly smile of welcome as she nodded to him to sit down.

Bill was engaged with three customers: Americans from their accent. There was a middle-aged father, clean shaven, keen, and suggestive of a wise baby as he peered through his enormous horn-rimmed glasses. The women, the daughter looking hardly younger than her mother, were in smart English country clothes. They looked wealthy, Culver thought.

Bill Coke, for once, appeared dowdy. But that was deliberate. She wore a voluminous studio overall, and her manner was brisk and businesslike. While the two women stood talking, a little apart, in undertones, of a set of Chippendale period chairs they had been inspecting, the man was asking pertinent questions of packing and Customs' declarations.

"You'll provide a written guarantee, of course, Mrs. Coke," he said vaguely:

"We always do so," Bill reproved him. "And our New York agent will clear the goods from the Customs and hold them ready for despatch at your convenience."

"That's pretty good. That's business," the man approved.

His family called him across the room to where the girl was admiring a Dutch flower-piece in a black frame. Mrs. Coke had sense enough to let them alone.

She came over to Culver in a prim, professional manner, though she deliberately grinned at him knowingly. Culver felt she wanted to wink.

"Good-morning," she said. "I'm so glad you've come. That Flemish dower chest is here now; I know you wanted to see it before it went away."

"What, have you sold it?" he asked, with interest.

"Yes. That goes to Philadelphia—almost at once. To the Jeffreyson collection. Mr. Jeffreyson's agent saw it only yesterday and bought it then and there. A wonderful specimen, I'm almost sorry it's going so far away."

The Americans were listening, and she went back to them. They asked about this chest, and presently Bill took them out to the studio to inspect it.

Culver was amused. Bill Coke was smart. An amazing woman. He had been watching her keenly as she was engaged in her craft, and it was startling to realise how little she had changed in essentials from the girl of that twenty-five-year-old photograph. She had retained the same confident, superior smile; the same easy poise. There was no shadow of doubt about her identity.

And when she returned, after some time, she was alone, and she came up to him smiling at some joke of her own.

"You are really a dear," she said, "to have come just when you did. It gave me such a chance—to boost my own importance. And in that car, too. Is that yours?"

"Yes," he lied glibly. "I've just collected it from the works."

"Lucky man," she said. "On the strength of it I described you as an immensely rich amateur with an eye on those chairs. I sold them!" She shrugged her shoulders in an impish way. "But come into the

studio and have a cocktail and tell me all the news. Where's the Congo man?"

"The Congo man's making himself a devil of a nuisance," Culver answered, with a frown. "He keeps me messing about while he does business in London. And I really only came back here on his account."

Bill opened her eyes in reproof.

"But how ungallant," she said mockingly. "Even though it be true, you might have suppressed it."

Culver looked at her for a moment, then, shamelessly, he added:

"But now, I hope he doesn't come back for weeks—that is, if the charming Mrs. Coke will do me the honour of allowing me to show off the beauties of the car, she so much admires, to her."

"That's better," Bill laughed. "A little tardy, but not a bad recovery."

"When will you come for a drive?" he demanded bluntly.

"I don't know. To-morrow?" Culver thought she was rather pleased.

"Splendid. Let's lunch somewhere."

"No. Work in the morning," she said definitely.

"I'll be pleased to take tea with you."

"Right. We'll have tea anywhere you like within a radius of a hundred miles."

"We will keep well within that radius, if you please," she announced firmly. "Comfort I love; but speed I detest. And if I come with you, I command. Is that understood?"

"Mrs. Coke, the Fowler is at your service," he answered, with a smile.

II

When Culver drove round to The Pines the next afternoon, there was a picnic-basket outside the door with Dirk the Alsatian on guard over it and Ann Gray sitting on the steps looking sulky, and trying to make friends with the dog.

"Hallo," she drawled gloomily, in response to Culver's greeting. "Bill says I can't come. I do want to intrude, and I'll come like a shot if you ask me. But Bill's so stuffy. I said you wouldn't mind."

Bill herself appeared at the moment, a heavy coat over her arm.

"Well, I've told him," Ann announced candidly. "He hasn't asked me yet."

"Ann, you really are impossible," Mrs. Coke said, with a touch of embarrassment. "I don't want you, my dear, because I'm afraid of you. I can manage Mr. Culver all right, but not you—certainly not together."

"Honest, I won't make him drive fast, Bill," Ann argued.

Culver looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Shall we let her come?" Bill asked.

"Of course," he answered, thankful to have some lead to follow.

Ann jumped to her feet.

"Bill, you're sometimes quite human," she said slowly. "And we'll take Dirk, too——"

"We will not," Mrs. Coke said, with decision. "Dirk—go in."

The dog looked up resentfully, and Ann went on:

"I must have someone to talk to. Richard Culver isn't really afraid of Dirk. Only a little."

Again Culver smarted under the girl's mockery;

that humiliating faculty of hers of making him rise so easily to the obvious flies she threw at him.

"Of course I'm not afraid," he said. "Let the dog come by all means." He was almost angry. Why did she always make him behave like a clumsy hobbledohoy? Culver prided himself on his ease of manner.

Mrs. Coke looked sedately amused; as though she read his thoughts. Then suddenly she decided to close the incident. She frowned at Ann, and gave a hardly perceptible shake of the head. Culver noticed it, and fumed. Why was it everyone treated him as a child?

He stooped down to pick up the basket.

"This goes in, I suppose?" he said ungraciously, and Dirk's instant, savage growl made him start back instinctively.

Ann's face was provocatively vacant. Mrs. Coke kicked the dog and turned its growling to a yelp. And Culver, not caring in his annoyance whether the beast sprang at him or not, pushed the hamper into the back of the car, and, trying hard to appear unconcerned, insisted, almost to the point of rudeness, that the dog should come.

It was a bad beginning, but Bill Coke triumphed over it magnificently. In half an hour she had won Culver back to a happier frame of mind. She flattered him with cunning, and told him that it did Ann good to be treated as he had treated her.

"That dear child thinks every man bows down and worships her," Bill said earnestly. "To be reminded that she is only a rather forward, young woman now and again is salutary." Then Bill really sacrificed herself. That, perhaps, won Culver more than anything. She bade him speed up the car. And with the needle showing over sixty, she yet managed to smile, and say convincingly: "You know, I can hardly believe it. The driver does make such a difference. You're one of

the safe sort, Mr. Culver. I dare say I could hate you, but I could never mistrust you."

Culver purred.

III

They picnicked on a stretch of purple common overlooking the sea.

It was miles from anywhere. Bill herself had indicated the place. "I was here years ago," she said. "When poor Wilfred was alive." And then she apologised for making him picnic at all. "Men do hate it, I know," she admitted. "But you said I might command. And I've done my best."

She produced a siphon and a large flask of whisky from the hamper, and pointed to them with a mischievous smile.

Ann was curiously subdued, and even the Alsatian managed to exhaust itself, to a tolerant friendliness, in mad gallopings about the lonely heath. After tea they wandered to the edge of the low cliffs and scrambled down a slippery path to the sea.

Though the sharp gale of a couple of nights ago had died down, there was a heavy surf still beating on the shingle, and Ann suggested, with sudden enthusiasm: "Amber."

"You can find heaps of it washed up here after a gale," she said, as though the beach itself were made of amber; and for a full hour they amused themselves in vain search.

Ann drifted away from Bill and Culver. Throughout the afternoon she had left them very much to themselves; so much so that once or twice Culver had almost felt a mild embarrassment, and when Mrs. Coke glanced suddenly at her tiny wrist-watch and exclaimed, "We must get back," Ann was missing.

They found her sitting in the car.

"I couldn't pick up anything. I got fed," she said, in answer to their questions. "I sang out to you, but you wouldn't listen. You got anything?"

Bill Coke was impatient. It was later than she had thought.

"No, and I don't think there was anything to find," she said in a preoccupied tone. "Ann, dear, help me with my coat. Mr. Culver, I'll forgive you if you hurry back. I must be home by seven."

Culver, sensing her anxiety, was busy with the engine.

"I'll just turn her before you get in, and run her back on to the road," he said. He climbed into the car and pressed the self-starter. But only a shrill whine resulted. The engine would not start.

Culver fiddled with the levers on the steering wheel and tried again, without success. Then he got down and lifted the bonnet of the car.

Mrs. Coke watched him with an odd, wondering expression.

"Don't say the thing's broken down," she said peevishly. But Culver, his head bent over the engine, did not hear her.

Ann came up to him, looking mildly interested.

"What's up with the bus?" she asked, gazing over his shoulder.

"I don't know. Got cold, I expect," Culver said, and was aware then that he was lamentably deficient in knowledge of the intricacies of the Fowler engine for one who was supposed to have owned the car for some time.

Ann made obvious suggestions. But for all Culver could do the thing would not start.

It was getting chilly, and Bill Coke had got into the back with the dog. Culver had to go to her, at

last, with a confession of failure. The body was thick with the reek of her Turkish cigarettes, and he had an impression, from her smileless face, that she was really angry. He expected an outburst in reply to his apologetic :

"I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid we're stuck."

Yet, although her voice was not genial, she took it well, he thought.

"What do we do, then?" she asked, looking at him with resignation.

"If you and Ann will wait here—you'll be all right with the dog—I'll cut in to Covehaven. It's only four miles. I'll get a car there to take you home. I—I *am* sorry," he repeated. "This car's never let me down like this before."

Mrs. Coke shrugged her shoulders expressively, and forced a bleak smile.

"I don't suppose it's your fault," she said. "But these things always do happen when you least want them. This means, I expect, that we can't possibly get back before nine."

"I—I'm afraid not," he faltered, knowing full well that they'd be lucky to be back by then.

"Oh, damn!" she exclaimed coldly. She hoisted herself from the soft seat. "It's no good waiting here; we'd better come with you, it will save half an hour. We'll leave the things here; I suppose you'll get the car towed in to-night."

"Yes. I shall," he agreed, "if you and Ann don't mind going on alone."

"I'd prefer it to sitting here indefinitely," she said sourly.

The walk to Covehaven was one of the least congenial Culver had ever known. Mrs. Coke was a bad walker, and her temper grew steadily worse, showing itself in long, sullen silences, broken by savage out-

bursts of annoyance with the road, her thin shoes, and the chill wind; all excuses for her annoyance with him, Culver realised. Yet, on the whole, she was behaving remarkably well, he admitted.

Ann cheered up, but no one responded to her lighter mood, and she, too, became quiet. And it was a long four miles, with a last mile that seemed like two.

Culver got them away in a ramshackle Ford just before dark, with a good hour and a half's journey ahead of them. He tried to be cheery as he bade them good-bye, but even Ann could only muster a mocking, "Don't think much of your posh Fowler," and Bill was frigid as she answered, "Oh, don't apologise any more, it only makes it worse. I'm not blaming you."

He was glad when they had gone.

IV

They towed the Fowler into Covehaven. It was nine o'clock before they got her into the local garage, and Culver was far too sick and disgruntled to care what the cause of the trouble was, that night.

He was oppressed with a sense of failure. It was hard to define, but very present, none the less. He had set out with the idea of skilfully extracting information from Bill Coke. He had meant to put cunningly devised questions to her, but somehow he had failed even in that.

He had been put off his stride from the start by the contretemps with Ann and the argument about the dog. Then Bill had fooled him with her clever talk and subtle flattery. He realised it now, and vague suspicion began to grow in his mind.

It looked almost arranged, this forcing of Ann

upon the party. There was obviously a very close understanding between the two women. And Ann had been so strange, so unlike herself. As if she had been watching. The way she drifted away from them. . . .

A new suspicion took root, grew and blossomed in a second. The breakdown. Had Ann been monkeying with the car? They had found her there when they came back from the beach, and she had taken the whole incident very calmly. So had Bill, too, for that matter. Her annoyance had had something unreal about it now that he came to think it over.

Culver felt suddenly flat, as a man does who realises, at last, that he has been duped. So it was he who had been fooled, not they. They had worked this simple trick upon him and gone off chuckling, no doubt, once they were out of hearing; chuckling with satisfaction at having so easily achieved their end.

But what was that end? That was the next question that arose in his mind. They must suspect him, and they must have wanted to keep him away from Oldford that night—that much was clear. Never once had either of them suggested that he should leave the car to the local garage people's care and return with them. Parry must be told of this as soon as possible—Parry and Harris. It was important.

Having made this decision, it came to Culver with devastating clarity that what he had to disclose to Parry and Harris was almost definite proof that Ann Gray was an active associate in the crimes of Bill Coke and Clement Foster—possibly that peculiarly unpleasant beast known as Friend.

In Dick Culver every sense of the decency and fitness of things rebelled at this thought. It was impossible, as impossible to believe Ann Gray really

pursuing a life of crime, as to contemplate betraying her to the authorities if she were.

Culver faced that fact unashamedly. He knew, then, that he was quite willing to let Foster, Bill Coke, Mingay, Elsa, and any others of that pariah crew escape, so long as he could save Ann from disgrace. But could he save her? That was a question not so easily answered.

He was lurching, through the moonlight, along the rough, country roads in a shabby box van, the only other motor vehicle available in Covehaven that evening. It was this van that had towed the recalcitrant Fowler from the common, and its driver, a taciturn youth, most unwilling to undertake the long journey to Oldford that his employer had demanded of him, was pushing the crazy car along as hard as she would go.

Culver gazed helplessly at the countryside, silvery cold under the waxing harvest moon. But the beauty of the night escaped him. There was mockery in the hard, dense shadows, and pitilessness in the eerie, still light. He would not incriminate Ann, but how in heaven's name he could save her from herself he could not see.

Before they reached Oldford, Dick Culver had managed, mentally, to drug himself into a state of false hope. He knew it was false, but he would not admit it. His was much the same attitude as that of a man who, knowing himself ill, deliberately refuses to consult a doctor lest he be further assured of the evil.

He clung to futile straws. Perhaps he was wrong after all—the Fowler might have genuinely broken down. At any rate, he had no right to assume Ann's complicity until he was sure. Or the girl might be acting under compulsion. She had been subdued;

perhaps Mrs. Coke had some hold on her; was exploiting some trivial indiscretion in a form of blackmail.

That idea appealed to him more strongly, and he developed it. It seemed very plausible, Ann, a rich, headstrong girl in the power of an utterly callous adventuress. He recalled Ann's mood of sadness on the night of the dance at The Pines, when she had seemed about to confide in him. And that strengthened his new-found belief, and cheered him.

He would have it out with Ann in the morning, he told himself. There should be no beating about the bush; he would talk straight to her—frighten her, if needs be.

They were running down the hill into Oldford, with its silver-streaked sea forming background to the toneless silhouette of its houses.

"Say I'll be over some time to-morrow—or the next day," he said to the sulky driver. "There's no hurry."

He did not want to know the verdict of the inquest upon the Fowler's breakdown, and, as though it were a sop to his conscience, he gave the lad a tip that forced, even from his surly lips, thanks of sincerity and surprise.

CHAPTER XIX

I

THE resolution was still firm the next morning, but the carrying out did not seem nearly so easy to Culver as he walked across from the Blue Boar to the Palace Hotel.

His design was to catch Ann before she went out. He would make excuse that he had come to inquire how she and Bill got home, and report on the car. Then, he had thought, he would ask her to come over to Covehaven with him before lunch, and they could talk on the way. And—if there were anything suspicious about the Fowler, faced with it, he would spring his suspicions upon Ann and then really go for her—tell her what a fool she had been—imply that he knew a lot—and, he hoped, force a confession from her.

It seemed so simple as he had schemed it out in his mind, but now, walking into the crowded lounge of the hotel, the talk loomed as an incredibly difficult one.

Suppose he was wrong. Suppose Ann turned on him, justly angry, at a false and insulting insinuation. She might—she probably would—go straight to Mrs. Coke with the story. . . .

Culver found himself with a sneaking hope that Ann might already have gone out.

But she was there, dressed to go out, talking to a tired, ill-looking woman, who drooped in an arm-chair, a morning paper in her lap. Ann caught sight of Culver and greeted him with her slow, mocking smile. She was herself again.

“Get the old bus home safely?” she called to him.

"What was up with her? I'd rather have a second-hand Ford if that's what Fowlers do."

He explained, in a stilted way, that he had left the car at Covehaven, and he was aware, all the while, of the inquiring, almost accusing eyes of Ann's companion fixed upon him.

Ann broke in suddenly:

"Oh, but you don't know Beth. I meant to tell you yesterday she was here. Beth, this is Richard Culver, who made me late last night. Oh, you needn't look so old-fashioned. He's perfectly respectable. Sometimes he's as prim as one of father's deacons."

Culver bowed awkwardly.

"Miss Gray has the merit of speaking her own mind," he said, with an effort to appear at ease.

"Miss Gray," Ann mocked him. "Oh, come off it, Richard! That's what he's like Beth. Oh, gosh! Look at the time." Ann grabbed her bag from the arm of the chair. "I simply must scoot. Richard, dear, be an angel and talk to Beth for a bit, will you? You can talk about me—you both disapprove, and it will be such fun for you both. Good-bye."

And that was how she left them.

Culver watched Ann's retreating form as she went, smiling, across the lounge to the door; perfectly self-possessed, seemingly quite unaware that she had done anything unusual. Then he turned to the woman, who was staring awkwardly at him, and he felt sorry for her.

She looked so ill, and there was a helpless expression in her eyes.

He tried to be natural.

"Your cousin—it is cousin, isn't it?—is rather an—an unconventional young person, Mrs.——" he began.

Beth answered gratefully.

"Ames," she said. "It's so like Ann to ignore names. I wonder she even told me yours. Yes. Ann is trying—very trying." She sighed and played nervously with her newspaper.

"But she has spoken of you," Culver went on, trying to put the woman more at her ease. "You are the cousin who went down with measles, are you not? You look awfully seedy still. I hope you are really better."

Beth Ames was listless.

"Oh yes," she answered with little conviction. "It does leave one rather feeble. But I felt I had to come and see what Ann was doing. I'm supposed to look after her—it's entirely supposition." She laughed scornfully.

Culver sensed an ally in Beth. She obviously was worried about Ann, too, and together, perhaps, they might influence the girl. Anyhow, here was a blood relation through whom he might communicate, if needs be, with Ann's parents.

"Won't you come to a less noisy place?" he asked. "It's very jolly in the sun this morning—and Ann has charged us to discuss her."

Beth seemed too weak to resist any suggestion. She rose complacently, and Culver led her to the verandah, overlooking the sea, where they could sit in the warm autumn sun, comparatively undisturbed. Beth was a woman in the late thirties, he judged, but her thin, pallid face accentuated her features and made her look ten years older. And she was dreadfully nervous and apprehensive, he saw at once.

She would not smoke, and she appeared to be debating something in her mind while he talked easy conventionalities to give her a chance to compose herself. He had an impression that she was weigh-

ing him up mentally, and presently she said with directness :

"Mr. Culver, I don't know why I should bother you with this, but I feel such a dreadful responsibility. Ann's people are abroad, and they look to me to take care of her—and—really I can hardly take care of myself." She smiled pathetically. "But can you tell me who is this Mrs. Coke who seems to fascinate her so much? Is she—er—all right?"

Culver frowned. It was a difficult question to answer, and he hedged for the moment.

"I—I don't know what to say—quite," he replied judicially. "Mrs. Coke is—is well born. She's the widow of a well-known artist——"

"I know, I know. But she keeps a shop or something. Ann wants to go into partnership with her."

There was a prim anxiety in her voice that made Culver laugh. If that were Bill Coke's only drawback, his mind would be free of a great load of care.

He explained the "shop," and it seemed slightly to relieve Beth Ames. "Yet this Mrs. Coke is rather—Bohemian," she commented. "I suppose all these artist people are. Last night, for instance, it was nearly one o'clock before Ann came in. She did have a breakdown with you?"

"Oh yes," Culver said quickly. "That's quite true—the breakdown." But he dropped his eyes thoughtfully. Ann should have been home soon after nine. What was she doing with Bill Coke until nearly one?

Beth sighed.

"I expect I'm old-fashioned," she said, "but Ann is such a headstrong child. And one o'clock! It is rather late for a girl to be out alone, don't you think?"

Culver agreed, but reassured her glibly that the circumstances were unusual.

Beth went back to Mrs. Coke; she was still uneasy about her.

"Of course, if you really think it's all right," she said uncertainly, "I suppose I need not worry."

Culver seized the opportunity.

"What exactly does worry you, Mrs. Ames?" he asked.

Beth looked flustered for the moment, then faltered :

"It's a dreadful thing to say, but you know that Ann is supposed to be very rich. I'm always so afraid that people may try to—exploit her. And she's so perfectly hopeless when she gets these sudden fascinations for people. She'd give anything away."

The idea was a new one to Culver, and not an unwelcome one. Perhaps this explained the relationship; Ann might be quite innocent of Bill Coke's crooked ways and merely one of her victims.

"That has to be considered," he admitted. Then :
"Has she ever done anything of the kind before?"

Mrs. Ames seemed glad of the opportunity to unburden her heart, and in some way share her responsibility. She told of Ann's past escapades with undisguised disapproval, of her chauffeur experience of which Elsa had spoken, and of the few weeks she spent as a cook in London.

"That is where she got to know this 'Bill.' " Beth spoke the word with distaste. "She worked for friends of hers. They seemed to have been queer folk. And when Ann left them without warning, she gave them fifty pounds in lieu of notice, and said that was what she was worth. The people kept the money. I think it disgraceful."

Culver had to smile; he wanted to know more of that spectacular incident. But he was determined to encourage Beth Ames' dislike of Mrs. Coke.

"I think, perhaps, it wouldn't be a bad thing if you could get Ann away from here," he said at last. "All I will say is that I know Mrs. Coke is a—a very keen business woman. And some of her friends are not too

desirable for a wild young woman like Ann." He was talking paternally, and he was glad to notice that Beth Ames obviously was in sympathy with him. "Your convalescence won't go very well here if you are worried," he continued. "Couldn't you get Ann to see that? Make her go away at once—to-day, if you can. Say it's only for a time, if you like." He hesitated, then decided to chance it. "Believe me, Mrs. Ames," he finished very earnestly, "I, too, have been worried about your cousin. I can say no more than this: I don't think Mrs. Coke is a very helpful companion for her."

Beth looked terrified.

"But what do you mean?" she exclaimed hopelessly.

"Just that, and that only," he said firmly. He had taken the step now, and he was determined not to go back.

"How can I get her away? You don't know how difficult she is."

"Try," he encouraged. "Talk to her seriously. Ask her to come for your sake—and—and frighten her if you can. Is it any use threatening her with her father?"

Beth shook her head weakly.

"I don't know. I really don't know," she said. "I'll speak to her, of course. I'll speak to her."

"Do," he urged, trying to put some resolution into this woman. "And, Mrs. Ames, I wonder whether you and she would dine with me to-night? Perhaps—I might help."

Poor Beth gave a watery smile of gratitude.

"If you would, I should be so thankful," she said.

Culver became brisk. "Indeed I will," he reassured her; then he turned the conversation and sat for the best part of the morning trying to encourage

her, and learning many odd things about Ann Gray and her cousin's life together.

II

Franklin Parry had hinted that he might want Culver's more active help and co-operation soon. "Don't worry; I'll let you know," he had said, "but always keep in touch with your pub, in case." And Culver had an ominous feeling that Parry would communicate that day.

He did not want to see him then—not until he had "had it out" with Ann, and he meant to have it out some time that evening if it were possible.

Beth Ames he counted futile. As a well woman she might possibly exercise some control over Ann, but in her present state she was weak as water, mentally and physically. But even that weakness might prove a weapon to use—grounds upon which to appeal to Ann, first of all, at any rate.

To avoid any chance of contact with Harris and Parry, as much as from a reluctant desire to know the truth about the car, Culver went off to Covehaven after an early lunch.

The man at the garage met him with a sheepish expression. His manner was awkward, and in response to Culver's deliberate "Well, what was the matter?" he shuffled.

"It was the ignition, all right," he answered. "I thought it would be the ignition."

"Yes, yes," Culver put in impatiently. "But what? How did it happen—a faulty part or something?"

The man looked up with an uncertain grin.

"Wasn't nothing wrong with the magneto till someone made it so," he said. "Looked to me as if

someone regular tried to smash 'un. All pulled about it was. Was you trying to fiddle with 'un or anything, sir?"

Culver jumped in quickly. Despite his fears, this confirmation rattled him badly, and he wanted to disguise his feelings.

"I'm afraid I was," he answered with hardly a moment's hesitation. "I thought the magneto was wrong. Did I do in the contact breaker?" He laughed in what he hoped was a natural manner.

"You did, sir," the man agreed. "But what you can a-been after——"

Culver checked him.

"I know, I know," he said. "I'm a rotten mechanic. Anyhow, it's all right now? And you got the ladies back in good time, too?"

"Ah—I did that, sir," he said. "Regular pushed the old Ford along." The man smiled reminiscently. It was he who had driven the car. "We was in by five past nine. I passed you and the boy on the road, and I was halfway home and more."

Culver encouraged this story; it shifted the fellow's interest from the Fowler.

"Good man," he said. "They told me you'd made a great journey. Now, what do I owe you?"

Culver paid his bill, talking volubly and making heavy jests about his inexpert handling of the car until the very last moment. He felt, as he drove away, that he had, at least, convinced the garage man that he was responsible for the mishap. But that mood of forced joviality left him quickly, once he was clear of the village.

Then he felt more anxious, more despondent than ever he had known himself. The evidence against Ann was overwhelming. Nobody else could have smashed the magneto. And no hopeful theory of Beth

Ames', that Bill Coke was trying to get money out of Ann, could explain why she should do that.

The possibilities were frightening. Even if it were sheer devilment that had led Ann into association with Mrs. Coke's hidden life, that would offer neither excuse nor defence when the crash came. Culver thought of the girl as he would have thought of a drug addict, led, perhaps, to her ruin through morbid curiosity in the first place, then, too late to withdraw, gripped in unescapable consequences of her folly.

That was the solution. Ann had involved herself so far that she could not now draw back. Yet Culver vowed that he would extricate her somehow.

He made a wide détour, driving heedlessly to pass the time away. He wanted to be back in Oldford about seven—in time to change before Beth and Ann should appear. And seven o'clock found him back at the Blue Boar, weary, harassed of mind, and full of dire foreboding.

The hall porter handed him a letter, which he opened almost in fear. He glanced at the bold signature, "Elizabeth Ames," then read with immense relief the opening lines.

"Your advice was perfectly splendid," Beth wrote. "Ann is so sympathetic that I feel really mean. She has agreed at once, and we are going to town to-night."

He read on. Beth was verbose and extravagant in her terms. She described Ann as "that dear child," and continued: "When I spoke really seriously to her about that undesirable Mrs. Coke, although she was naturally indignant at first, she took it very well. I just *hinted* what you had said, and I think it really did frighten her."

The letter ambled on, expressing the fulness of the

grateful heart of this ineffectual woman, and Culver closed it with a sigh of satisfaction.

So that was that. He did not quite take Beth's point of view about Ann's sudden conversion to sympathy; it looked much more as if she really were scared—probably when she realised that he would guess her complicity in the smashing of the magneto. But she was out of the way, thank God, and if only she would keep out of the way until Parry and Harris had completed their work of justice all would be well.

Yet Culver was conscious of a rather empty feeling. Oldford without Ann would be uncommonly dreary. Beth had given no address, and he wondered how he could communicate with her. He wanted to communicate; he still wanted to talk straight to her and invite her confidence. He wanted very much to help her.

As he changed, it seemed to him that his success had been too easy. Then he fell to wondering what Mrs. Coke would have to say about it. He must see her. And how much or how little he should tell Parry of the Covehaven incident. He must see Parry, too.

He dined alone in a gloomy mood, out of which he tried to reason himself. But the depression remained.

III

It was still upon him when he woke the next morning, and it fretted him. He should have felt elated instead of downcast; but now he could not make up his mind to anything. Even the necessary call at The Pines he shirked, and, sitting smoking an after-breakfast pipe in front of the hotel, he noted for the first time that Oldford was emptying.

The school holidays were drawing to a close, and quite a procession of luggage-laden cabs passed by, bound for the station and the early express to town.

An air of melancholy was upon the place despite

the warmth of the sunny, hazy morning, and he visualised Oldford as it would be in a week or two's time, shorn of its visitors and shutting itself up for its long winter rest.

Heaven forbid that Parry should keep him hanging about till then ! He would die of boredom. And this, he reflected bitterly, was how he was spending that joyous holiday to which he had looked forward so eagerly. He would have got more fun out of life if he had stuck to his job in Fleet Street.

There was something familiar about a car that was coming from the distance along the narrow High Street. His impression was a subconscious one, and, in his dejected mood, he hardly realised that he was watching it until it had almost reached him. Then he jumped to his feet and glared stupidly at the driver.

It was Ann's two-seater, with Ann at the wheel; Ann looking very subdued and weary, but there was a new, purposeful expression in the big, tired, hazel eyes. There was no lazy mocking there; little friendliness, indeed.

He went across the pavement to where the car had stopped, and blundered out an exclamation of surprise, but Ann answered without a smile :

"Go and get a hat; I want to talk to you, Richard Culver. I'll wait."

There was confident command in her tone, which made him uneasy. It was clear that his simple plan had miscarried, and Ann's return in this mood boded new and unrealised troubles.

He got in beside her, and she started off without a word, and to his nervous attempt at conversation she responded with laconic coldness.

"But didn't you go away with your cousin?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"But—but why have you come back?"

"Because I'm staying here."

"And Mrs. Ames—what about her? She's really awfully seedy, you know."

"I know. That's why I took her home. She'd no right to be here."

Ann never smiled, never even looked at him. She kept her eyes steadily fixed on the road ahead, and originated no remark.

She was taking him the rough coast route which runs close by the sea, and she kept to it for many miles until they were well beyond the range of Oldford's most adventurous explorer. But at last, on a stretch of breezy common not unlike the scene of their picnic near Covehaven, she jerked the car into the heather, stopped the engine, switched off deliberately, and turned in her seat and faced him.

"Now we're going to have it out," she said gravely.

She had completely taken the initiative from him. It was not Ann Gray who was going to be talked to straightly, but Richard Culver.

"What do you mean?" he asked weakly.

"I'll tell you," she said. "Now look here." She leaned forward like some angry mistress whose patience has been exhausted by the negligence of a servant. Culver felt inferior. "I've not the slightest objection to what you think about me," she went on very calmly. "You can disapprove in your grey, Puritan mind from morning to night. But you're not going to interfere with me. Do you understand that?"

She had overdone it a little. There was an arrogance that roused Culver's spirit. The inferiority complex passed.

He met her gaze of annoyance with a look of stubborn determination.

"My dear Ann, I am going to interfere with you,"

he said, "and I'm more determined now, than ever, to do so. That's that."

Ann had not expected this reply. She looked baffled for an instant, then a light of battle flared in her eyes.

Culver pressed his advantage. As she was starting to retort, he interrupted, still in the same level voice :

"Now what are you complaining of? I'm going to talk very frankly to you, and you can talk as frankly to me. This is a good spot; we'll stay here all day, if needs be."

Ann flushed, and, woman-like, she seized on the minor issue.

"We won't," she said. "I shall drive back just as soon as I like."

"No, you won't," he answered, with an irritating, mirthless smile. "You may find your magneto broken if you try."

It went home. He saw her hesitate between defiance and, he thought, fear. But she countered him gamely, swinging herself easily from the car and walking slowly towards the sea.

"All right. Go and smash it if you want to," she called to him calmly over her shoulder, and Culver found himself compelled to follow her.

She had found a mossy hummock by an ancient gorse-bush, blown all awry by years of North Sea gales, and she sat down unconcernedly and pulled out her cigarette-case. Culver dropped to the grass beside her.

"Well?" he queried blandly.

Ann puffed at her cigarette, and appeared not to have heard him. He played her own game and smoked in silence, too. Presently she said :

"Don't you think it's rather impertinent of you to talk to Beth about me as you did?"

"Very pertinent," he answered, without taking his

eyes from the distant sea. "Neither your cousin nor I want to see you making a fool of yourself."

Again she flushed, and he felt a little shame for his crude speech.

"And then you're libelling my friends," Ann went on. "What do you know against Bill Coke that you should say such beastly things about her?"

"I know that she is not a desirable companion for you," he said gravely. "What do you know about her, Ann?"

Ann gave a hard laugh.

"I know she's a very plucky woman, having a devil of a life to earn a decent living. But, of course, that's the sort of woman all men go for. They hate independence in women."

"Now don't be silly," he said. "Sneers won't help. What do you know about her?"

"Don't be more impertinent," she answered coldly.

That nettled him. He had not the strong advantage that he had thought.

"Why did you smash the magneto of my car the other evening?" he flung at her suddenly.

She turned round to him with her eyes wide open in wonder.

"You mad?" she asked, with a touch of her old self in her voice. "You've got magnetos on the brain. I never touched your rotten car."

Her frank answer confounded him. He had expected, perhaps, an evasive answer or a weak denial. But her words rang so true.

"If you didn't, then who did?" he asked feebly.

"I haven't the least idea," she answered, with indifference. "All I know is that your mouldy car let Bill and me in for a foully cold drive home."

"And you got there about nine and didn't turn up at the hotel till one," he put in rather snappily.

"Is that really so? And if it were true, has it anything to do with you?"

He felt she was getting the upperhand, and he fought against it.

"It had a good deal to do with your cousin; and I propose to make it my business," he retorted.

"I can't make you a gentleman," she said contemptuously, "but I can punish you for lying about my friends. I'm going to tell Bill all that you've said about her, and I hope she'll get her lawyers to go for you. It's simply damnable that people should be allowed to say such cruel things. So that's what I propose to do, Mr. Culver—and you justify your slanders—if you can."

He saw, then, how he had blundered, and something of panic came over him. One word from Ann, and Bill and the parson would be off like hares. And Ann, too, perhaps. In fact, already the damage was done. If Ann were in with the gang she would have passed the word. They might be gone now. And yet Ann couldn't really be a confederate in their crooked schemes.

Culver looked at her, sitting there with her clear, steady eyes, so indignant, and so full of fire and courage in their resentment, her clean-cut, determined chin, her wonderfully attractive skin, burnt so brown by honest sun, and owing nothing to the make-up which he hated. Her head was thrown back a little with the chin raised—pugnaciously, he thought. She was fighting, and fighting skilfully, too. But she was undeniably frightened. Hardly perceptible quiverings about the strong mouth betrayed emotion, and the quick, forgetful way in which she puffed at her cigarette disclosed a patent uneasiness.

And she was beautiful, really beautiful. There was nothing furtive about her, nothing underhand. Ann,

truly serious and angry he had never seen before, and Ann in this uncompromising mood of battle was the most alluring Ann he had ever known.

He weakened unconsciously.

"Oh! damn it all!" he said, in real distress. "Why won't you be frank with me. I know you've got yourself into some sort of a mess with this woman, and I can help you out of it. I—I'll go to any lengths. You're only bluffing. You know that quite well. What's the truth, now? You don't look happy, and—and—I want you to be happy——"

He saw her frown as, mechanically, she took yet another cigarette from her case. She struck a match idly.

"I'll face Bill Coke if you like, face her with you," he went on earnestly.

Ann dropped the match, still gazing dreamily out to sea.

"In fact—I've a mind to do it, anyhow," he said recklessly. "I'll——"

Ann gave a little scream of fright. "Oh, look!" she exclaimed, in inconsequent alarm.

Culver looked down. Her match had set the dry heather ablaze.

"Beat it out," Ann called. "I'll get a rug. Tread on it. Tread on it."

She was on her feet and running for the car, and Culver, startled by the suddenness of the event, was trying to stamp out the rapidly spreading fire. He heeded nothing else until Ann's voice came to him, mockingly, calling across the heath.

She was in the car, and the engine was running.

"And when you've put it out, you can walk home," she shouted, quite unperturbed, "and that may be a lesson to you, Richard Busybody."

CHAPTER XX

I

IT was a very weary and savage Culver who tramped into Oldford later that morning. Nearly ten miles of rough, shadeless road was trying enough in itself, but, with the humiliation of Ann's victory and the utter hopelessness of deciding what action he should take, the walk had been a misery.

Culver was sullenly angry with Ann; as angry with himself for caring two straws about her. If the girl wanted to go to the devil, she'd better go, he argued, instantly to raise a counter-argument of determination to stick stubbornly to his task. He could not believe her really bad; Bill Coke must be exercising some hold over her.

And Parry's point of view had to be considered, too. In common fairness he must let Parry know the developments of the past two days—though he would not say a word of Ann's share in the breakdown of the Fowler. But he would have to confess his blunder with Beth, and Ann's threat to go straight to Bill Coke with the story of his warning.

Unless she had already done so—and, of course, she would have done. Probably this morning's affair had been part of their scheme, Ann had got him out of the way again, while Bill packed up and vanished. Then what would Parry say to him?

"Oh, damn everything!" he exclaimed to the air, and on the last mile he decided that the only thing to do was to make a frank confession to Parry and clear off himself. Ann must work out her own salvation. He had done all he could do, and failed miserably.

He was walking hard, lost in thought, and he passed on a pace or two before he realised that someone had accosted him. As he pulled up, mechanically, and turned with a vague, "Were you speaking to me?" he found Harris at his side.

Culver's instant thought was: "The game's up. They've bolted and Parry has sent to tell me."

But Mr. Harris' voice was mild and polite.

"Don't know me," he murmured quickly, then, "Could you direct me to the church, sir?" he asked, in his rich Cockney.

It took Culver a second or two to pull his wits together.

"The church? The church?" he faltered stupidly.

"Yes, sir. They said it was up one of these streets, but I wasn't quite sure——"

Culver recovered himself; Harris' mild eyes flashed understanding at him.

"It's—it's up the hill. You've passed the turning. Take the main road a little further back." He indicated the way.

Harris came close to him, listening intently.

"Thank you, sir," he said, adding hurriedly, "Mr. Parry would be glad if you'd come over as soon as you can. We'd like to see you. And come carefully—you never know who's on the look out. Maybe you won't get back to-night. The next street, sir—thank you. Top of the 'ill, you said?"

Harris jerked his hand halfway up to his forehead, nodded, and hurried on ahead. Surprised at the suddenness of the incident, Culver had to force himself to walk on naturally. His inclination was to stand stock still gaping in wonder.

Then, slowly, it dawned on him that Ann could not have warned Bill Coke, or surely Harris would have known of her flight. He found himself uncertain

whether to be glad or sorry, for now it meant that he would be expected to take an active part in a scheme that might end in her arrest.

II

Bearing Harris' warning in mind, Dick Culver came to Plomesgate by a circuitous route. He drove to Eckenham at a speed that would make it difficult for most cars to achieve; swung round and took a cross-country road that brought him into Salthithe by the Chipping Langham Road, and, at the little garage in Salthithe, he hired a bicycle, saying he wanted to explore the marsh tracks, and he might not be back for his car until the next day.

Parry was alone when he entered Beach Cottage, and he welcomed him heartily.

"Old man, we're rather up a gum-tree to-night. Things are moving quick, and it's a three-man job. You game to do a tricky bit of work—no child's play, and a chance of getting yourself into trouble? Say 'No' if you feel like it, but I'll tell you," he said, after a few moments.

Parry pondered his pipe, then threw at Culver:

"We want you to explore Bidely Church tower. We've got a shrewd idea there's something there that oughtn't to be there."

"Yes—if—if you want me to," Culver replied, in amazement.

"Good. Wait till Harris comes back and he'll give you details." Parry seemed to think it unnecessary to explain any more at the moment. "Now, what's your news?"

This bewildering, matter-of-fact manner stupefied Culver. He wanted to ask a score of questions, but

instead he found himself complacently answering Parry's inquiry.

Parry listened with interest, too much interest, Culver began to fear. Though he kept Ann in the background as much as possible, Parry went straight for his own well-founded suspicions.

"Sounds very fishy to me. That girl queered the car, no doubt of that," he said decisively.

"I did think so, but I can't be sure," Culver retorted feebly. "Mags do go wrong."

"Not mine," Parry stated firmly. "They're suspicious of you; there is no question about it. But I don't quite see the idea——" He gazed into a cloud of smoke, frowning.

Then Culver blurted out a watered story of his interview with Beth Ames, adding: "But though they went away, Ann—Miss Gray—was back this morning. She as good as told me that—that her cousin had interfered with her, and she'd taken her away." He shirked a full confession, and felt miserably uneasy about what he had told.

Franklin Parry's frown deepened.

"That was silly of you, old man, damned silly," he said, after a moment's thought. "The last thing in the world I'd like to happen now is for Bill and the parson to get scared. And it seems to me you've scared 'em. No, I wish you hadn't done that."

Culver knew the blame was well deserved, but he was unrepentant. There was something so terribly grim about this laconic man and his companion, waiting, watching, ready to spring at any moment from their hiding.

"I can't help it," he broke out impetuously. "I don't believe that girl is really one of this crowd. If she is, she's dragged into it against her will. Forced—blackmailed, perhaps. I wanted to get her away, and I

hoped her cousin could do it. Damn it all, Parry! even you can't want to see a decent, jolly girl like that in the mud."

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"Who put her there?" he asked, without feeling.

"I suppose they were all decent once."

"Well, Ann is still," Culver protested hotly. "And I tell you, you've got to help me to get her out of it. She can't have done much harm—she's foolish; to blame, if you like, but you don't make me believe she's a Bill Coke—or an Elsa."

A slow smile of mild amusement came upon Parry's straight mouth. He blew a dense cloud of smoke and waved it away with one hand.

"So it's like that, is it, old man?" he said quietly.

"I didn't quite realise it before." He fixed his queer, far-seeing eyes upon Culver's flushed face, and Culver flung his head back and met those quizzical eyes with defiance.

"Yes. I suppose it is," he answered, with a curt nod. "So now we know where we are. I'm sorry if I've let you down, but I would rather do that than let her down."

"That's all right, old man," Parry agreed impassively. "It's your business after all." His interest seemed to have evaporated.

"Let's be clear; how do I stand?" Culver persisted.

"It seems you've gone over to the other side. That's clear enough."

"That's not fair," Culver protested with anger.

"You know it's not fair. I want to get a girl I—I'm very fond of—out of a mess she's got into by—by mistake. She's impulsive and inexperienced, and—and—your gang of crooks have probably trapped her. That's my position."

"Well?" Parry's stolidity was infuriating.

"If you've got any decent feelings you'll help me."

"How?"

"By—by—I don't know. By seeing that she doesn't get dragged in with the others when the crash comes. You can do that. Give me the tip and let me look after her. I'll get her away by force if necessary. Or——" Culver seemed suddenly to realise the weakness of his position. "Oh, Lord!" he finished in real distress. "Can't you give me some advice? What would you do in my place? You must see what a hellish thing it is."

Franklin Parry's face for once showed some feeling; it's hard lines softened scarcely perceptibly, but there was sympathy in his eyes.

"I see, old man," he said. "I'll do what I can—I can't say more than that. I've got no grudge against the girl—particularly." He knocked his pipe out on the bars of the stove. "But I don't know that I'd try to see her again for a bit, and—I don't think we'll tell Harris. *He* mightn't understand."

"You mean it? You'll help me?" Culver asked eagerly.

"You didn't leave me much option," Parry answered enigmatically. "Yes. I'll help you make a fool of yourself."

III

The soft twilight blended into a hazy moonlit night, but Harris had not returned. Parry was growing anxious; Harris should have been back by dusk, he said, but professed himself ignorant of what he was doing.

"I'm very much in the dark myself," he explained. "Queer devil, Harris; very suspicious. Perhaps he's right. He says his experience is that half the cases he's been engaged on have been decided by someone

talking too much—generally the other side. Most secretive is our Mr. Harris, but, by Gad! he's smart."

Parry produced a meal, but at nine o'clock, with no word from the absent man, he said: "Well, we'll carry on alone. We'll have to make a start soon."

He outlined to Culver his task, and chuckled as he handed him a couple of keys—"the result of Mr. Harris' first innocent visit to Bidely Church," he said. "It's a mighty good job that man's on the side of the law—if he weren't he'd give his pal, Friend, points for devilry. You'll find the locks remarkably well oiled, but someone else did that. They're using the church, old man, and it's just possible they'll be taking something to or from it to-night. But you'll be all right in the tower, and one of us won't be very far away if there's any trouble."

Culver was thrilled. The adventure appealed to him, and for the first time for weeks his mind was easier about Ann. If Franklin Parry said a thing, Culver was quite confident that he meant it. He listened to his instructions intently, querying uncertain points, and studying carefully a recently drawn plan of the church, also the work of Mr. Harris.

Parry piloted him by devious, cross-country tracks, skirting Bidely village and crossing open heathland, with the certainty of one who knew every inch of the district. Culver was entirely lost, and when Bidely's mellow chime rang out eleven, almost overhead as it seemed, Culver started. He had thought the church a mile away in the other direction.

Parry whispered: "Well, old man, I'm going to leave you here. Work round up there in the shadow, and get out before dawn at the latest, and make for Bidely cross-road. And, if there's no one there, find a nest in the heather; one or other of us will come along in time. Good hunting."

Parry melted away into the misty night, and Culver, with his heart beating louder than he liked, moved stealthily towards the dense shadow of the encircling trees about the church.

It was not difficult going. A grass-grown, gravel path led round the chancel end to the porch, and there, in its silence and darkness, he stopped, listening carefully.

He could discern the vague mass of the rectory close at hand, but it seemed wrapped in an age-long sleep. Neither light nor sound came from it, and only a restless sighing from the trees, moved by the light breeze, broke the intense quiet of the night.

Just for a few black seconds Culver's nerves went back on him. He felt a sudden panic, as though in every shadow there were watchers, waiting their time to spring on him. He felt trapped, with a horrible sense that the moment he moved some jeering laugh would come from the darkness, gloating, and telling him that he was caught.

To fight down this unwelcome horror he plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out the keys. They jangled, with a noise that, to his strained ears, sounded immensely loud. He tiptoed forward swiftly, groping for the door. Something brushed against his face and set every nerve tingling, and brought an involuntary gasp of alarm from his lips. But the next moment he realised that it was but a flapping paper on the notice board into which he had blundered, and he muttered, "Idiot," to himself, and the incident curiously enough steadied his nerves.

As Parry had foretold, the lock, when he turned it, worked with astonishing ease. It gave out but the faintest click, and the door swung back as though it were on ball bearings.

Culver closed the door and locked it behind him, to find, then, that the silence he had left was hardly

comparable with the deathly stillness of the inside of this ancient building. It was eerie. The windows glared at him like cold, accusing eyes, and his footsteps, when he moved, set up a clatter that seemed to echo back from the hidden roof and proclaim his presence to the whole countryside.

He had grown desperate now, and he hurried forward towards the tower door with an instinctive desire for safety. For the church, small as it was, seemed so full of vast, unplumbed spaces, with shadowy, shapeless things lurking all about. He breathed more freely when once he had gained the shelter of the tower.

And there, in a few moments, he managed to control his nerves and to look about him with the light of a carefully shaded torch. Soon the remoteness and stillness of the place ceased to affect him.

The lower chamber, which he had entered, was cluttered with the implements and gear of the men who were working on the roof. There were short ladders, and straw bags of tools; a roughly fitted bench with shavings swept carelessly beneath it, and two iron drums, the labels upon which proclaimed some insecticide with which, clearly, war was being waged upon the destructive wood-worm.

There was nothing suspicious here, and, after a time, Culver ascended the creaking ladder-stair which led to the upper chamber. This was the ringing floor. Eight ghostly ropes, each with its woolly, fluffy hand-piece, hung from the ceiling. There were benches round the wall, and inscriptions on the plaster telling of the bell-ringing feats of past generations. A big deal chest promised mystery, but it contained only a mass of rubbish, and, so far as Culver could see, there was nothing hidden here that might have bearing upon the veiled iniquities of Bill Coke and the renegade parson, Clement Foster.

The floor above would be the bell chamber, and

approach to that was up an almost perpendicular ladder to a closed trap-door. Culver began the ascent, but in darkness, for the ladder ran by the wall and passed a window through which the light of his torch would have shone towards the rectory. He checked as he reached the window and gazed wonderingly into the moonlit night.

Was anyone inside that house? he asked himself. Sleeping—or watching? And what was Parry up to now—and Harris? A loud click, just above his head, startled him so that he nearly lost his hold on the ladder, and, then, almost deafening, so close was he to the bell, the clock gave out its midnight message.

Culver stood fascinated, listening to the last flowing reverberations, spreading and fading into infinity, then he turned once more to the window—and gasped.

There was an unmistakable light moving out there in the darkness, moving from the rectory garden towards the church.

Strangely enough, Culver felt no fear, only interest, tremendous interest. So Parry had been right, something covert was going to happen in the church to-night. Quietly he unhasped the latticed panel and swung it open. The sound of voices drifted up to him, and one he recognised without question. It was Clement Foster's, and he was arguing in anything but his familiar, mild manner.

IV

Curiosity gave place suddenly to alarm. Culver realised his position.

The tower, Parry had suggested, was the part of the church these people were using, and if they were coming to the tower now, Culver was caught. Then what would happen? Would they use violence, or would they be more subtle and treat him as the burglar

he undoubtedly was in the eyes of the law? That would be a rich revenge—if they dared take it.

His eyes went instinctively upwards to the trap-door. There was safety in the belfry, surely, and possibly from there he might gain the leads themselves. That was the only means of hiding, and he did not hesitate.

He scrambled up the ladder into the draughty bell chamber, with its unglazed windows open to the cold night. And there he found yet another ladder, leading to the roof itself. But he waited by the belfry trap, holding it half open and listening. There would be time to go higher if he heard them coming up the tower stairs.

But nobody came, and soon curiosity again grew stronger than caution. Culver began to wonder whether, after all, they had entered the church. No sounds reached him save the stolid ticking of the clock, and he crept down, leaving the trap open behind him.

To the ringing chamber no unusual sounds ascended, and more cautiously than ever Culver went yet a stage lower. And there his doubts were set at rest and his alarms revived again. He heard voices in the church, and the tower door was open. That gave him a bad moment; he could not for the life of him remember whether he had closed it or not. But a light streamed through it dimly, and he could not resist the temptation to creep down and spy.

From a few steps from the bottom, he was able, by crouching, to see that the light was at the further end of the church. He chanced the last few steps, impelled by the power of his curiosity, and he stood, sheltered by the half-open door, and peered into the nave. Only one man was visible, and that the parson, standing on a ladder by one of the windows. He was

talking to somebody, loudly, and with no attempt at secrecy.

"Right. She's free now. Take it gently, it's damned brittle stuff. Ready. . . ."

To Dick Culver it was like a nightmare scene. This man was mad, talking apparently to nobody. Or was he mad himself? What in heaven's name were they doing? Foster seemed to be taking out one of the windows but. . . . And then it came to him. There flashed back into his memory, Clement Foster's own words when first he had visited Bidely Church. The parson's mild and appreciative voice saying: "The gems of the whole church. . . . In perfect condition. . . ."

The two thirteenth-century lancets, that's what they were stealing. Culver knew enough of the value of such early glass to realise that they were worth thousands—if you could sell them.

The monstrous impudence of the proceeding appalled him. Surely no man had ever stolen a stained-glass window from a church before. It was staggering in the novelty of its effrontery. Church plate was stolen; church safes broken open; but windows—

"I've got it," a muffled voice called from the outside of the church. "Shift the bottom panel now and I'll bring them both in together."

Foster went to work like an expert glazier; Culver watched him, fascinated, as he worked the glass free, his companion busy on the other side.

Presently the second panel was out and the parson descended his ladder rubbing the dirt from his hands. He went across to the door and Culver got an extraordinary view of his set, preoccupied face. The bland looseness of expression of the Clement Foster he had known had gone from it; it was hard and evil, and

there was a smudge of dirt across the sweaty forehead that gave him the appearance of some grimy toiler from a stoke hole.

He leaned against one of the old-fashioned box pews and mopped his face, then advanced to help his confederate as he came in.

It was Ellis, the chauffeur-verger, Culver saw with amazement; Ellis bedaubed with dirt and plaster carrying the glass, like a baby, in his arms.

"Shove the stuff in the tower," Foster said, "and let's finish the job. I'm damned sick of it; I'd never have taken it on if I'd known what it meant."

It was not until then that Culver realised his danger. The men were moving towards him, hardly a score of yards away. He dared not shut the tower door, he hardly dared creep up the creaking stair. But he must chance it.

He groped his way upward. From the ringing chamber he listened for a second. The parson and Ellis had reached the door and were discussing the best way of getting their burden up the stairs. So they were coming higher. How much higher? Culver wondered anxiously. He scaled the ladder to the belfry, a wild scheme taking form in his mind of jamming the trap-door against them, if they should ascend so far, and finding refuge on the roof itself.

On that upper floor, with the trap just ajar, Culver lay, cold and apprehensive, waiting for what seemed an interminable time, frantically scheming wild means of escape, yet possessed of an enormous desire to see what next would happen.

At last they came, moving at a snail's pace; first the parson with a torch, then Ellis shifting his heavy burden step by step. And to Culver's immense relief he saw that the hiding-place of the glass was to be beneath him.

Foster opened the great deal chest and flung its contents to the floor. It was a motley collection of rubbish, old curtains, tattered hymn books, and worn-out hassocks—the débris of years. Carefully they placed the stolen windows at the very bottom and piled in the rubbish with ordered disorder upon them.

"That'll do all right," Foster said at last. "But it's got to be out of this place to-morrow. I won't have it hanging about here."

"Well, I'm not going to shift it with this moon," Ellis replied truculently. "It won't do any harm here till we get a dark night. I can't see why you won't let me take it round in the car. Who'd know?"

"I'd know. And I won't have it," the parson said roughly. "It goes down the river—I'm taking no chances."

"No, you never did," Ellis sneered. "I wonder you'd the nerve to do what you have done. You and Bill are getting the wind up. You don't still think Culver knows anything?"

The parson turned upon his companion, almost with a snarl.

"What I think doesn't concern you, Marty," he said with menace. "You do what you're told and think when you're told, and that will be better for you. You're not told to think now. Go on, get down, we haven't got too much time before dawn."

"All right," Ellis mumbled submissively. "I was only suggesting."

"I do the suggesting in this game, you do the work," Foster answered in the same dangerous tone.

V

To Dick Culver this sounded like sheer madness. How, he asked himself, could Clement Foster ex-

plain the missing windows? Their gaping emptiness would declare his crime to the whole world. The workmen would be back at eight, any chance visitor an hour or so later.

This was more than impudence, more than bravado—it was idiocy. But there was evidence enough now to satisfy Harris or Parry. They could arrest the parson at once—unless—unless perhaps he were going to clear off and leave Ellis to complete the job—do the work as he had uncompromisingly put it.

Dick Culver could see no possible means by which the parson could bluff out this incident, and he was anxious, now, to get the hypocritical renegade caught. That shocked him as much as anything—the thought that one who had been in Holy Orders should have grown so debased. Foster's fall could not have been entirely his wife's fault; this man must have been crooked from the beginning; mad, perhaps, but bad to the core.

Culver's chief desire, then, was to get away. The importance of his discovery oppressed him; he felt, in a sense, outraged by the cunning wickedness of it all. But how to escape? Foster had spoken of more work to do—was that in the church?

The two men had gone, and the click of a lock suggested that they were not returning to the tower. Culver tried to recall that lowest room in which the workman's gear was stored—there might be a window there from which he could escape. He made his way cautiously downward.

Through the thick door, noises penetrated from the church, indicating that that way was barred, and, growing reckless, he chanced his torch to seek the exit he hoped to find. But it was not there; only by smashing the latticed light, high up in the west wall, could he gain access to the open air. There

was nothing for it but to wait in patience, and that long, cold wait tried Culver more than any experience he had known.

It was exasperating not to know what was going on. Minutes dragged like hours, and he grew cramped and frozen. There were times when he dozed, and came back to his senses with a start of alarm, to realise his predicament. But still those ceaseless, faint noises went on.

The clock had struck five before release came, and then, at a new sound of movement in the church, Culver fled back to the safety of the upper storey. And from the ladder, through the open window, he saw the parson and Ellis creeping through the cold light of dawn like ghouls.

A ground mist gave them an uncanny appearance as they faded from sight going towards the rectory.

Culver did not wait. Now was a chance to escape, and he took it. With a mighty sense of relief he emerged into the dimly lighted church, and his eyes went straight to the two lancet windows, looking to see their accusing void.

But so far as he could see, the old glass was still there. Even in the first faint light of morning it held a warm glow, the tiny mosaic panes of blue and red blending in a rich misty violet.

Incredulous, he went across the church and gazed at the glass at close range. It was intact. The same quaint little medallions were set in their rich borders, the same odd little saints stared stiffly at the ancient church. It was inexplicable. If it were not the windows they had been after, what in heaven's name was it they had secreted in the chest in the tower?

Culver was weary and overwrought; the long strain of his vigil had left him unable, almost, to trust his own senses. He let himself out of the church, puzzled

and anxious. This was an unreal world into which he had plunged, an unclean world, and he hated it.

Unthinkingly, he went round to view the mystery windows from the outside, with a feeble, reasonless idea in his mind that some solution to the problem might be found there. He was walking without caution, forgetful for the moment of the proximity of the rectory, but as he turned the corner of the building, a sudden movement in the long grass of the churchyard brought him abruptly to a halt, with all his former shapeless fears crowding back into his mind.

He crouched against the grey stone of the chancel, and he was absolutely certain that some human being was lying prone, and motionless, on the misty ground but a few yards away.

For some minutes neither moved, then a whisper came through the air, and Culver heard his own name being spoken softly.

It was Franklin Parry speaking.

"Culver. Culver. Over here, quick." Parry raised himself slightly, and a ghostly arm beckoned from the tall grass.

Culver went forward, and Parry almost pulled him to the ground.

"Quiet. He's coming back," he murmured. "Get behind that bush as sharp as you can."

Parry writhed his way along in that same deft manner that Culver had seen before, and they found cover, in the shelter of a huge and ragged holly-bush, just as Foster appeared out of the foggy half-light.

VI

The parson eyed the windows critically, and busied himself, with the air of an artist, daubing something

on the plaster at their base, and touching up a point here and there, then, apparently satisfied, he moved away.

Parry whispered: "Now, we'd better cut. Things been happening, eh?"

Culver nodded, and they crept through the dawn towards the higher, heath ground, in the direction of Bidely cross-roads. They had been going some minutes before Parry spoke in his natural voice.

"We've had a long spell, old man," he said. "I'm frozen, and I bet you are."

"Yes, but where did you appear from?" Culver asked.

"Me? I've been round about all the time. I haven't been a hundred yards away since I left you. And daren't smoke either." Parry produced the well-worn calabash, and began to load it with relish. "So now you know what your pals are up to."

"I'm damned if I do," Culver exclaimed. "I thought they were stealing those old windows." He told his experience in a perplexed tone.

Parry chuckled. "That's all right, old man," he said. "That's what they're after."

"But, hang it all, the windows are there. We've just seen them."

"Not the old ones. Just fakes; that's all. A simple move, when you come to think of it. It's often done with pearls and old silver, but I've never known it done with glass before. Nor has Harris. He'll be annoyed. He vowed I was wrong, but I wasn't." Parry seemed really satisfied; he smiled to himself with appreciative content. "You know," he went on, "you sell the family jewels and have replicas made. Nobody else knows. I daresay nobody would know about this job for years, but for us. And they've been at it for weeks, bringing the new stuff up at night,

and damned cunningly loosening the old stuff in bits and pieces by day. Your parson pal's a genius—he's Friend, all right."

Culver shot question after question at Parry. At last he was learning something of the hidden life this man had been leading for weeks past. He heard how Harris had discovered that there was communication between the boathouse at The Pines and the old cottage under the river wall at Bidely, a ramshackle sort of place that had been rented recently by a "London gentleman interested in wild-fowl shooting."

"I think we could put a name to that sporting gentleman," Parry mused.

"You mean Foster?"

"I expect so," Parry nodded. "The poor fellow should have been down a fortnight ago, but he's been taken ill. Bidely's very sorry for him, so the landlord of the local pub told Harris. They say it's no place for a nice gentleman. It's rheumatic!"

Culver was sorting this wild, tangled story a little more clearly in his mind. There were numberless gaps that yet needed filling, but one point seemed very obvious.

"Anyhow, you've got this blighter now," he said hopefully. "I know where the old stuff is; I saw them put it there. And they can't get it away till to-night. You'll nab him at once, I suppose."

"Not quite so quick, old man," Parry answered. "There's the lady to be considered. When the stuff's on her premises, then we move, and I rather hope there'll be a nice little haul all at once—Bill Coke and her pals, and the Reverend Humbug and the simple Ellis. Gad! the world will be cleaner when we've got that lot inside, as Harris puts it."

CHAPTER XXI

I

MR. FRANKLIN PARRY returned to the Blue Boar at Oldford that day. He drove up in the Fowler just before lunch-time, and it was assumed by the hotel that Mr. Culver's absence on the previous night had been due to his journey to collect his friend. Culver and Parry encouraged this surmise.

The plan had been suggested by Harris over an early breakfast at Beach Cottage. Harris had spent a fruitless night in a dinghy moored a hundred yards away from the boathouse of The Pines, and when he had met Culver and Parry in a lonely part of the heath country, near to Bidely cross-roads, he had been distinctly discouraged. The news that Parry had to give, had galvanised the little man into loquacious excitement.

But although he talked a lot, and asked endless questions, he said remarkably little. Culver received the impression that, as the drama drew to a close, Harris wanted to play a lone hand. It seemed as though he wished to be rid of Parry—and Parry took the suggestion with his characteristic indifference.

"Just as well to let Mr. Harris have his own way now," he explained to Culver as they drove away from Salthithe. "It means more to him to net this lot than it does to us, and he's got to get the police busy. That's what worries him most; to see they don't act too soon or too late. There's always a bit of friction."

Fatigue and the reaction from the strain of the night made Culver unusually incurious. He wanted to sleep first and talk afterwards. It was all unreal,

anyhow, and he felt that he would be immensely glad when the whole business was ended. So long as Ann was kept out of it; hers was the only problem that really exercised his weary brain. He thought a lot about Ann, though only once he mentioned her to Parry.

"You've not forgotten your promise about Miss Gray?" he said, after a long silence as they sat sleepily over a late lunch.

Parry did not look up.

"I'll do what I can, old man," he answered. "Don't worry; I can't say more."

But Culver did worry. Always, when he thought of that net that was closing about The Pines, he saw Ann in its meshes, and, but for Parry's vague assurance, he could see no hope of her escape.

Culver slept after lunch, the deep dreamless sleep of great weariness, and when at last he came downstairs, it was to learn that Parry was out.

"Went out about three, sir," the porter said, handing him a couple of letters that had come by the afternoon post. "Said I was to tell you he'd be back about tea-time."

Culver glanced idly at his correspondence, and a suddenly awakened interest showed in his eyes as he read one postmark: "Wandle End, S.W. 23."

He ripped the envelope open quickly, and glanced first at the signature. For an instant it meant nothing to him, a primly correct, "A. F. Cupper," then it came to him—Adelaide Cupper, the faded lady of St. Crispin's, the woman who had known Clement Foster. He turned back to the beginning and read eagerly.

Miss Cupper was coldly formal. Would it be convenient for Mr. Culver if she were to call upon him some time soon, she wrote, and underlined the "soon." It was a private matter, she went on, and

added as an afterthought : "Concerning the Reverend Mr. Clement Foster." There was a postscript, written evidently in agitation : "It would be much better if we could meet in London, *not* here."

Culver gazed at this odd, old-fashioned little note in wonder. Coming as it did so swiftly after his experience of Clement Foster's latest roguery, it appealed to him as pathetic. This queer, loyal spinster—how hard it would hit her when she learned, as she must do in a few days' time, the true history of her one-time, parson hero.

There would be staring headlines in the papers. Culver visualised them : he had written them himself in his time. "Ex-London Vicar's Career of Crime," was the sort of thing, or, if Foster turned out to be Friend, and there seemed little doubt of that now : "Parson turns Master Criminal."

Poor Miss Cupper. The story of Wandle End would undoubtedly be dragged from the past now. This case of a renegade priest and his accomplice wife was going to provide one of the biggest newspaper sensations of the age. With his Fleet Street training, Culver could assess it at its true news value. It would be a great "story." And it would probably break quiet, little Miss Cupper's heart.

What she had to say about the parson, he was curious to know. It could not affect the march of fate at all, but he determined, instantly, to see the faded lady, and felt glad, too, that he would have the chance to prepare her for the impending shock. That seemed only common humanity. He would hear what she had to say, then tell her, sympathetically, that she had been deceived. It would be a rotten job. But then pretty well everything he had touched lately had been unpleasant.

He went across to the post-office and telegraphed Miss Cupper to meet him at his rooms in Blooms-

bury the next day, and when he went back to the hotel he found that Parry had returned.

Parry was showing signs of strain, too. He looked haggard and listless. But he seemed really interested in Miss Cupper's letter.

"You'll go, old man, of course," he urged. "I wonder what she has heard. It looks to me as if this slimy scoundrel was trying to re-establish his identity. Just the sort of thing he would do. It's the criminal's egotism. I wouldn't wonder a bit if he'd written to this fool woman. He's up to some other crooked game, you bet."

Dick Culver took the dinner-car train up to London that night and found a wire waiting for him: "Calling ten-thirty to-morrow. Cupper."

II

Culver slept like a log that night. He was so sound asleep when they brought him his morning tea that, as Mrs. Saunders expressed it:

"You give me a regular fright, you did, Mr. Culver. You must 'a' been late 'ome last night."

Culver grinned sleepily.

"That's all right, Mrs. Saunders," he said. "Only it was the night before. What's the time?"

"It's near ten, sir. You never rung." Mrs. Saunders became instinctively defensive.

"Ten!" Culver gasped. "Good Lord! And I've got a visitor in half an hour. Wash out breakfast. No time for that. I must dress." He jumped from the bed, and Mrs. Saunders fled, more certain than ever that Mr. Culver had been making a night of it. Gentlemen were always funny in the morning when they had. But Mrs. Saunders thought Mr. Culver a nice gentleman, if queer sometimes. She confided these convictions to her husband as together they

consumed part of the breakfast already prepared for their best lodger.

As Saunders said: "It's no good wasting it, Annie, and Mr. Culver's not the sort to niggle."

But Saunders was far less human when he showed fluttering Miss Adelaide Cupper into Culver's book-lined sitting-room punctually at half-past ten.

"Yes, madam. Mr. Culver is expecting you," he announced, with a respectful bow in reply to her timid inquiry. Saunders flung open the door. "Miss Cupper, sir," he said with that curiously mingled manner of intimacy and respect which had made him so successful a butler in his earlier years.

Miss Cupper hesitated at the door. She was wholly regretful of her action now that she was about to face Culver; but he sensed her nervousness.

"It's awfully good of you to take all this trouble," he said easily, although he himself was almost as nervous as she.

"Not at all. Really not at all," Miss Cupper fluttered. She dumped an attaché-case awkwardly on the floor and tried to force her church-worker's smile as she sat gingerly upon the first chair that she saw.

Culver became inanely hearty.

"Oh, come, Miss Cupper," he said. "Sit down here and make yourself comfortable. And how is Mr. Weston, and—er—the church? All going strong, I hope?"

Miss Cupper pulled herself up with obvious determination, drew in her breath sharply, like one in pain, and took the plunge as though she dared not trust herself to do so if she delayed.

"Mr. Culver, I told you a lie," she confessed with a rush. "I am sorry. I trust you will forgive it when I have explained the circumstances. They are very painful to me. So sad. So tragic. . . ."

Culver was puzzled and embarrassed. The woman

appeared to be suffering. Tears were very near to the surface of those big, frightened blue eyes that seemed to belong to a woman twenty years younger than she was. Miss Cupper looked, then, like a scared, pathetic child, bewildered and craving sympathy.

"I'm sure there's nothing to explain, Miss Cupper," he said, with an attempt at indifference. "How have we misunderstood each other? Something about Mr. Foster, I think you said. I—er—I suppose you've not heard of him for years."

Miss Cupper bit her lips, and her face screwed up again in that childish manner.

"No, no. Indeed, I wish I had. He went away—so—so completely. Went away bearing another's shame. But—I—I——" She bent down with a jerky movement and fumbled with her case. "I said I—I lied to you. I did. I told you I had no photograph of poor Mr. Foster. It was false—I had. Look."

She pushed a framed picture into Culver's eager hands. It was a cabinet photograph, faded with years, and set in a cheap silver frame, clumsily embossed. Culver's eyes went to the portrait in serious wonder.

He had the bland, rubicund Clement Foster whom he knew, in mind; the portly, complacent man of Bidely Rectory. And although there was something very reminiscent about the youthful face at which he gazed, he could not at the moment reconcile the features of the two men. Something called to his memory, something to which his memory would not immediately respond.

The Clement Foster of a quarter of a century ago was a clean-looking man with thin, grave face and kindly, sad eyes. His clerical collar was abnormally high and gave him a stiff, old-fashioned appearance. But he was a handsome man, an attractive man, and there was sympathy, if weakness, in the mouth.

"So this was your friend?" Culver said, scarcely aware that he was speaking.

Miss Cupper abandoned all reserve. The tears had won now, and she dabbed at her eyes angrily.

"That was my dear friend," she answered, leaning forward. "You said you had seen him, Mr. Culver. Has he altered much? Oh, tell me, please tell me all you can about him. He was happy, I hope; he had triumphed over his terrible cares——"

Culver flung his head back with a quick, jerky movement. That elusive memory for which he had been searching, he had captured. He knew now. This was not the face of Clement Foster of Bidely; never had that man looked like this. It was the face of Jean Malet, the Jean Malet he had seen for those few minutes at the very end of his life, when the merciful fingers of Death had so inexplicably smoothed the rugged cheeks of the old man and revealed something of his vigour and youth.

Culver could see again those wondering brown eyes which closed so slowly, almost contentedly, as the quiet words "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom" were spoken. The same wondering eyes were there in the photograph.

For the moment Culver felt stunned by the extraordinary significance of his discovery. He met Miss Cupper's questioning gaze unwillingly.

"Oh! You haven't bad news to tell me?" she whispered. She was staring at him in pitiable distress. "I would rather he were dead than——"

Culver bent towards her, his keen, grey eyes alight with understanding and sympathy.

"He is dead, Miss Cupper," he said quietly. "I was with him when he died. It was last August, in a little Belgian seaside town. But you may be assured that he died in peace. He died with a prayer on his lips, and I know that he was content."

"Then you, too, were a friend of his?" the woman exclaimed. She was fighting hard to control her feelings, and her mouth was twitching with emotion. "Please tell me some more. Really I won't—won't make a fool of myself."

"Yes, I was a friend of his," Culver answered simply, "but when I knew him he had changed his name. We always called him Jean Malet. If you like, I'll show you a picture I drew of him a few years ago."

"Please do." Adelaide Cupper clasped her hands nervously together and crushed her sodden handkerchief into a tiny wet ball.

Culver went across to a portfolio by his desk.

"You must be prepared for a change, a—tremendous change," he said kindly. "Poor Mr. Foster had a hard time towards the end of his life. A very hard time." He fumbled among a batch of sketches and drew out "The Pirate." "That was how I knew him," he added softly.

For a full minute Miss Cupper gazed at the graphic picture. She looked frightened, angry, rebellious, as if in her own heart she suffered all the hardship and injustice she believed the dead man to have endured. And then, in a queer, hardly audible voice, as if she spoke to Jean Malet himself, she murmured:

"Yes, it's you. But what you must have suffered! And it was my fault; I know it now. I've known it for years . . . for years. . . ."

III

Culver moved across to the window. His own thoughts were chaotic, but he was aware of this faded woman's suffering, and he tried hard to efface himself. It seemed indecent to be witness of so poignant a grief.

Miss Cupper seemed indifferent to his presence. Clearly, she had gone back through the years, and was living again the tragedy of her life.

She stared like a woman hypnotised at the picture, never taking her eyes from it, her lips moving in soundless speech. Culver grew almost as unconscious of her presence.

After the first shock of surprise had passed, he found himself suddenly glad, glad that the priest of Llanhurst and of Wandle End was not that furtive hypocrite of Bidely. And old Jean Malet's death was understandable now. Indeed, he must have suffered much, but his end had been peace. Whatever his sins may have been, he must have atoned for much in those last drab years of his life.

But there remained the woman, his wife. The problem of Bill Coke took upon itself a new and startling form.

She and the false Clement Foster! It was only at that moment that Culver appreciated the hideous outrage of the position at Oldford. It was not human.

Was the Bidely man a dupe of hers, forced, perhaps, to adopt her own husband's identity to further her own evil designs? The thought brought fear. Culver feared Mrs. Coke then, and hated her. With a pitiless, conscienceless woman of that kind, what chance of escape could there be for Ann Gray, if she were in her power?

Miss Cupper broke the trying silence. Her voice was hard and dry, and her face set and very old. The vagrant traces of a past youth were wiped clean out of her expression, and she spoke like a soured, self-centred old maid.

"Was that evil woman, his wife, with him when you knew him?" she asked.

Culver shook his head. "No, no. He was living alone. I never heard him speak of his wife."

"That's a blessing. That woman was worse than a murderer; she killed a good man's soul." Miss Cupper's tone was vindictive to the point of cruelty. "You know the scandal about Mr. Foster, of course. Well, I'm going to tell you the truth now, Mr. Culver, and God forgive me that I never told it before."

Culver came back to his chair. Miss Cupper stared straight through him, her lips compressed and her cheeks, seeming to have shrivelled, pale with deep anger.

"They said he was a thief," she went on. "It was a lie, but he wanted them to believe the lie—for that worthless woman's sake. I knew the truth—I saw it all, but he wouldn't let me tell. He made me swear not to tell. It was at the Capes, at a dinner-party; I was companion to Mrs. Cape then, and I used to come in to dinner if I was wanted to make up the party. But I wasn't wanted that night. . . ."

She stopped for a few moments, and Culver could tell that her mind was far away from his Bloomsbury rooms, back in Wandle End in its early suburban days.

"I admired Mr. Foster," she said more quietly. "I thought him a great and very good man. He was very kind to me, and I knew what he suffered from his wife. Half the parish did. It was common talk." She flashed a look of indignation at Culver as though he were responsible.

"Yes," he agreed, to bring her back to her story.

"She lived a—a dissolute life—Maude Foster."

The name, spoken so naturally, rang strange in Culver's ears. He had never thought of Bill as Maude Foster.

"Who was she, Miss Cupper?" he asked.

Miss Cupper bristled.

"That's what we all would have liked to know," she said with a wealth of contemptuous implication.

"She was Irish—or she said so. She used to talk about her father's estate, but we never heard where it was—no, never." Miss Cupper shook her head primly. "Nor were we ever certain of the aristocratic friends she was so fond of boasting about. There was one—Lord Kerramore—she used to talk of. Mrs. Cape met him soon after poor Mr. Foster went away, and he said he'd never heard of Maude Foster—or her rich father."

Culver was thinking of Bill Coke of The Pines, the restrained, correct woman of the world. Certainly Maude Foster had travelled far since those Wandle End days.

Adelaide Cupper went back to her story. She told it well, but with an abundance of detail, recalling unessential incidents that had impressed themselves indelibly in her mind. She named every person present at that fateful dinner, and she spoke with real feeling, despite the passage of years, of her disappointment at not being at it.

"And I had a new dress for it too," she said, with a wan smile. "I remember it so well. And it was only after seven o'clock that Mrs. Cape told me that Maude Foster was coming after all, so I shouldn't be wanted. That was her way—that woman's. You never knew what she would do. It tried poor Mr. Foster so; he was always having to make excuses for her."

And then came the confession, told in hard, bitter phrases. She was in her own room, "trying not to mind," as she put it, "and crying like a ninny." She had heard someone coming out of the dining-room, and presently somebody moving in Mrs. Cape's bedroom.

"I thought it was Mrs. Cape looking for something," she explained, "and I dried my eyes and went to her, pretending everything was all right. And I saw that woman," Miss Cupper added in a voice of

intense loathing. "She was opening drawers and looking back over her shoulder all the time. Oh, I knew what she was after, but I watched, and I saw her take Mrs. Cape's pearls. And then suddenly Mr. Foster came. I hadn't heard him. But he knew, too. Oh, it was terrible, Mr. Culver! He stood at the door, looking like some wretched, whipped creature, and I'll never forget the way he spoke. It was like a man being tortured. He said: 'Maudie! And you promised me!' That was all, but I can hear him saying it now. I thought he was going to die. . . ."

Culver was leaning forward fascinated by her words.

"And what did she say?" he asked sharply.

Miss Cupper's face blazed with anger.

"She swore at him," she gasped. "She used dreadful words. And then the others came. I don't really remember what happened—then. I ran away. I was shocked. I knew the woman was bad, but that—to swear at her husband—and a priest!"

Miss Cupper lived again the shame of that moment. Then she told how she had gone to the vicarage late that night, after she had been told something of the aftermath. She had faced Mr. Foster with what she had seen. Her voice shook as she added:

"He was angry with me, Mr. Culver. I had never seen him angry before. It was real passion. He told me—he told me—that what I said was untrue. He said it was wicked of me to say it. But I didn't care. I wasn't going to see him ruined for that—person." Miss Cupper shirked a stronger epithet. "I vowed I would tell, no matter what he said. Then he begged me not to—so humbly. It hurt me more than anything else. But he said it would help him. I was weak. I promised. He made me swear it. . . ."

She broke off, with a little sob, which told, as much as her fevered words, the sorrow of her life.

To Culver there was pathos as well as tragedy in this story, and for the moment it was the pathos and tragedy of Adelaide Cupper's life that most affected him. She was there before him, a quivering, suffering woman, proclaiming a deep and absorbing love which the years could not banish. Culver wanted to console her.

"Yet you were right, you know," he said quietly. "You have nothing to reproach yourself about. Mr. Foster would have suffered even more if you had shamed his wife."

"But she would have suffered, too; and she deserved to suffer. I wish I'd told," Miss Cupper retorted quickly. Even now her hatred was strong, as strong, perhaps, as her cherished love. The ferocity of her words startled Culver; there was something elemental in her passion, the more impressive since it came from so apparently a passionless woman.

Sententiously he answered: "But now it's too late. Let the dead bury its dead, Miss Cupper. I tell you Mr. Foster died in peace."

"But his wife?" she demanded grimly. "Will God let her die in peace?"

Culver lied boldly and deliberately.

"I know nothing of the woman," he stated. "Perhaps she is long since dead."

Miss Cupper's answer was disconcerting. She shrugged her shoulders, and gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Probably not," she said. "Women like that always flourish. She's found some other man to fool. I expect she's still living in luxury, admired by everybody. They do—bad women."

Dick Culver could not meet her challenging gaze. Adelaide Cupper's instinct was only too correct.

IV

It was an extraordinary history that Culver evolved to satisfy Miss Cupper's pitiful hunger to hear news of Clement Foster's later life. The true story, he hoped, would never be known. To tell this poor woman the facts, as he knew them, would be sheer cruelty. So he wove a simple, satisfying romance in which Foster figured as a quiet, retired man, who had travelled widely and had settled, in rather poor circumstances, in Belgium, and Adelaide Cupper listened with tears in her eyes, and gave thanks that Mr. Foster had suffered no more.

She even mustered a sad, nervous little laugh at his rough appearance in Culver's sketch.

"So unlike him—as I remember him," she said. "He was particular—most particular about his dress. Quite the dandy!"

Culver covered an obvious weakness in his fabrication with a hurried emendation.

"Ah! But that was drawn one day when he had been out with the fishermen. He almost lived amongst them at that time. . . . Had—er—lodgings in the sailors' part of this town; and spoke the language. . . ." Culver smiled comprehensively.

Miss Cupper sighed.

"How like him," she commented. "He was always so good to the poor. They really loved him." She digressed into a comparison of the Wandle End vicar's "way" with his humbler parishioners, while Culver thought of Jean Malet, as he had known him, the hated and feared of the fisher-folk of St. Gules, the man given to grim bouts of drunkenness, as Madelaine had recalled. He had no shame in the lies he had told. A Miss Cupper could never understand; indeed, Culver himself found it fantastic to reconcile the two figures.

The timid, faded lady left at last, fluttering and extravagantly grateful. She clung to the sketch until the last moment, feasting her eyes upon it from time to time, interpolating brave little comments upon the likeness and bold flatteries upon Culver's artistic skill.

He realised, as she was going, how much she desired that sketch, and he offered it to her.

Miss Cupper was overwhelmed with joyous embarrassment.

"Oh, but I mustn't take it," she exclaimed, holding the paper tight. "Yet if you would be so—so exceedingly generous——"

He pressed it upon her.

"A gift—from the grave," she whispered. "How I shall treasure it! The only message that ever came from him after his great sacrifice. I cannot thank you, Mr. Culver. I could not find the words."

But Culver, as he assured her with feigned ease that he needed no thanks, was struck by her phrase. In the mass of impressions and surprises of the past hour, one most obvious question had not before arisen in his mind.

"The only message that ever came from him," Miss Cupper had put it in her extravagantly sentimental way. But what of the letter Jean had written to his wife?

He knew her address, knew her occupation, apparently; for he used her trade name. And Elsa Mayer was in communication with him. The situation was inexplicable. Jean, the rough peasant of St. Gules, in regular touch with Bill Coke, who was his wife.

Did she pay him to keep away, or was he, after all, as bad as she; one of her gang like the man at Bidely, and Elsa, and—and Ann?

Miss Cupper, so anxious to leave, yet finding it so

hard to go, noticed his worried expression. She thought his mind, like hers, was upon the picture.

"You—you're not regretting——" she faltered.

"I—oh, dear me, no," he answered, then with a sudden inspiration, seed of a formless plan, "but would you lend me your photograph for a day or two? I'll promise to take great care of it—I—I'd like to have it copied—to show to another friend of Mr. Foster's."

The art department of Culver's old paper copied that faded photograph; the original was in the registered post addressed to Miss Cupper within a few hours, and Culver left for Oldford with a couple of hastily dried prints in his bag and an indefinite plan nagging in his brain.

Somehow, he felt, those prints might be useful; how, exactly, he was painfully uncertain. But they were evidence, proof of his knowledge of Mrs. Coke's past, and he might have to apply pressure to Mrs. Coke.

It was Ann's position that was at the back of these wild schemes, for Ann, he was for ever trying to force himself to believe, was acting under duress. Though Harris and Parry would undoubtedly have Bill arrested as a receiver of stolen goods, here was, perhaps, a new crime of which only Culver was cognisant. The woman must be a bigamist—or if there had been a divorce the fact that she had dragged her parson husband to her own murky level would tell against her. Or it might. At any rate, she wouldn't want the facts known. Perhaps Ann could make use of the knowledge——

Further than that he could not crystallise his ideas, though he wrestled with them during the three hours' journey through the placid, rolling country of East Anglia, from London to Oldford.

CHAPTER XXII

I

DESPITE the parson's threat, the old glass did not leave Bidely Church tower on the night after its removal. Even he agreed with Ellis that it would be folly to attempt to shift it on so brilliant a moonlit night, and he seriously considered his confederate's suggestion, that since it was the last lot, this might as well go by car.

For the parson was very well pleased. Things had panned out even better than he had expected, and he was anxious, now, only to get away; not only from a natural sense of caution, but because he was sick to death of the rôle he had been playing for the past weeks.

The parson liked the good things of this life, and he found them hard to come by in the primitive solitude of Bidely Rectory. A week or two in London, he thought, waiting until Bill Coke gave him the all-clear, would prove very welcome. Then he would go to America, reap the reward of his activities, and come back to Paris for a bit. Paris was always pleasant in the late autumn. After that he might try the rectory stunt again. It was a new idea—and so damned easy. If he could get away with the Bidely windows he might try for others; or, failing that, early church plate. With skilful replicas it could never be traced, and there was always a market in the States for old silver.

But the parson never talked about his plans; like Mr. Harris, he knew the danger of loquacity. To Ellis' importunity, about shifting the glass by car, he was non-committal, but he decided to go over and see Bill Coke that morning and decide then.

There were lots of things to be discussed. Probably he would not see her again for a month or two, and Bill was uncommonly useful. She had ideas. And, like himself, she kept a sane balance between money and danger. Bill, too, was fond of the good things of life, but she didn't take fool chances unless she had to.

He told off Ellis to overhaul the car, with a view to their impending journey to London, and decided to walk the mile and a bit between the rectory and the cross-roads, where he could pick up the Oldford bus.

His start was delayed by a young man on a bicycle, a friend of Mr. Britain's, who rode up just as he was leaving, and the Rev. Clement Foster greeted him most genially. He was very young, a curate at a big church in Manchester, where he had worked with Mr. Britain's son, and he was nervously polite to his elderly colleague.

But Foster was charming; he insisted upon showing the young man round the church, and drew his attention particularly to the thirteenth-century windows. But he watched the curate with anxious eyes as he gazed appreciatively at the glass.

"Wonderful! Magnificent!" he exclaimed. "I'd no idea there were such treasures here. Only a week or two ago I was in York—you know the old glass there, Mr. Foster?"

Mr. Foster denied the knowledge. He liked, but knew nothing of, old glass, he said.

The curate, delighted to have an opportunity of displaying superior knowledge, dilated upon the beauties and value of the York windows, and Mr. Foster listened with interest and appreciation.

"Indeed, you surprise me," he commented, in his kindly, unobtrusive way. "I had never realised that old glass had such a high value. Hundreds of thousands, you say? Dear, dear. Then I suppose these, too, are quite valuable—intrinsically, I mean,

apart from their superb beauty and their tradition. Ah! they were great craftsmen in old times; and they spared no labour for Mother Church." He laughed softly.

The young curate beamed. It was not often he had a chance to preach in this fashion.

Clement Foster was getting bored, and it was close to bus time.

"I was thinking of strolling to the cross-roads to get a motor-omnibus to Oldford. Would you, perhaps, lead your bicycle that way? You know, you have a very lucid way of explaining things, I feel that already I am quite learned in the glazier's art." Again that deprecatory, kindly smile broke on his rubicund face, and the curate almost blushed at the compliment.

They walked together across the heath, and the young parson rushed ahead to delay the bus for Mr. Foster, who found the rough going trying to his heart. They parted the best of friends, the younger man going on to Eckenham before returning to Oldford, where he was holiday-making at the Moot Hall Pension, and Mr. Foster direct to Oldford, where, as he explained with mild jest, he was going to waste some money at an antique-shop.

"And I shall ask the charming lady who keeps it if she has any old glass," he added.

"Do, sir, do," the young man urged. "It's awfully hard to come by, but if you can pick it up, it's well worth getting."

They waved to one another, and the curate's smiling face showed how pleasingly the elder parson had impressed him.

II

Mr. Foster ordered lunch at the Palace before he went to The Pines. He was well known there; he tipped generously, and the head waiter liked him.

"You shall have your usual table, sir," he said. "I'll see that everything is as you like it."

"I know you will," the parson beamed.

And he beamed again upon the elderly maid who opened the door to him at Bill Coke's.

"Please explain, if she's busy, that I can call after lunch," he said. But Bill herself appeared at the moment to bid him enter.

"How very curious!" she said, with her slow, engaging smile. "I was just writing to you, Mr. Foster. I've found a vase to replace the one Dirk broke. I think you'll like it——"

"I'm sure I shall," he interrupted, with gentle remonstrance.

They went up to Bill's office, and the parson dropped his ingratiating manner as the door closed. He became brisk and businesslike, and although he still smiled, there was no benignity in his expression. His whole attitude suggested that of a man who is very well pleased with himself, and expects his success to be recognised.

"Well, Bill," he began. "I'm off to-morrow. You'll have the stuff in to-night, and I'm going to start my holiday. If you like to trot up to Town as soon as you've got it packed and away, we'll have a party. It's been a good job, and a safe one——" He rubbed his hands with relish.

Bill's face was expressionless, but she did not seem to share his satisfaction.

"Then I take it I can have a hundred or two before you go?" she said, as if she were stating an unimportant fact. Foster's smile withdrew.

"I don't know about that," he parried. "Fifty, if you like, but we don't share till the stuff's cleared on the other side. That's the bargain."

"That may be," she persisted, a little peevishly. "But I've had to pay out a good bit on this business."

She took a cigarette and fitted it carefully into her long holder. "And it may have been easy for you, but I've had a hell of a time, one way and another."

"How?" he asked blandly.

"That man Culver," she said, lighting a match.

"He's kept me jumpy the whole time."

The parson gave a callous laugh.

"Well, Bill, you've only got yourself to blame for that," he answered. "If you hadn't lost your head in the first place——"

"It's all damned fine for you to talk like that," she broke in, "you didn't have to decide. You know perfectly well you were scared yourself at first."

"Only because of your blunder." Foster was truculent. "That faked letter was childish. You could have told him a dozen tales better than that. I mean, with the envelope in one writing and the letter in another, of course I expected the man to be suspicious. Women always lose their heads."

Mrs. Coke looked savage. "All right. I've admitted it was a break," she said. "But it doesn't alter the facts. And the man's still here; still hanging about. And you weren't any too clever over that time when they caught you with the Lowenstein 'Marquise.' I didn't lose my head when I set Dirk on to them, did I?"

The parson tried to stop these recriminations.

"No, Bill, I'll give you credit for that," he said, looking up at her appreciatively. "I wouldn't work with you if I didn't know you had brains. And the glass was good, damned good. I tried it on a sucking bishop who called on old man Britain just before I came away, and he swallowed it whole, and gave me a short Lenten address upon its beauty and value." He grinned as he recounted the incident of the Manchester curate.

But Mrs. Coke was in no mood to be entertained.

"That's another expense," she went on stolidly. "I've had to pay Elsa and Carl, and Eigen, who did the glass. He's not cheap, you know, and he wasn't any cheaper because he thought the stuff was wanted to sell as a fake. He cost me four thousand marks—real marks mind you; that's over a couple of hundred."

They argued and wrangled for half an hour. Foster was fair, but reluctant to pay. He admitted Mrs. Coke's case, but held to the letter of their agreement, and Bill never doubted that she would receive her full share of the proceeds, but she confessed frankly that she was very hard up.

The parson tried to compromise with a hundred down, arguing that he had to get to America and wait some weeks after that before he would sell the windows. They were destined for an eccentric German-American millionaire in an Indiana manufacturing town, a man with whom Foster had often dealt before. Louis Sieger, like Benjamin Wisdom, of Seattle, asked no awkward questions when masterpieces of art were offered to him, and Louis Sieger had recently taken up old glass and armour as decorations for the huge, castellated mansion he had built himself on the outskirts of the town in which he had made his fortune in Sieger's Non-Drip Bath Taps.

"Honest, Bill, I can't do more," Foster persisted. "There'll be ten thousand dollars coming to you before Christmas if you can get that chest over safe. And a bit more perhaps. You'll have to hang on for that."

"I should hope so," she said with a touch of asperity. "The chest's my venture and the Lowenstein 'Marquise' too. You get your commission, Max, no more. But I doubt if the chest will go unless I get a couple of hundred quick."

The parson knew Bill Coke to be hard as steel in a bargain. In money affairs she was immovable.

"Oh, all right," he said, surrendering at last.

Bill melted. With a friendly smile she complimented the parson upon the perfection of his arrangements.

"Really, Max," she laughed, "I believe you could have got away with the church itself if you tried. I suppose Louis Sieger doesn't want a genuine old English church for his backyard?"

"A synagogue's more in his line," the parson answered a little sourly. He was counting out bank-notes and parting with them with patent reluctance.

But Bill took no notice of his disgruntled mood. She had won her point, and she wanted Foster to be in a good temper. She talked on lightly.

"I see Culver's tropical friend is back—Parry. Ann says he arrived yesterday morning. By the way, Max, there's rather a delicious touch about him. The Ellen-glazes knew his family. He was old Miss Gillot's mysterious nephew. You remember the Carey Manor business? You negotiated some of the books——"

The parson looked up sharply.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he rapped out.

"My dear man, because I didn't know myself till yesterday," Bill answered unconcernedly. "But it is funny, isn't it?"

"Very," Foster commented in an enigmatic voice.

"The sort of joke that doesn't amuse me."

"Oh, Lord! Max, what on earth is there to worry about there?"

But the parson did not pursue the subject; instead, he said abruptly:

"I think I'll send Marty over with the rest of the glass in the car to-night. You'll have no one here about dinner-time. He can hide it in the shrubbery, if you like, and bring it in later."

Bill frowned. Her eyes betokened serious thought.

"No," she said at last. "It's too risky. I'm no

fonder of chances than you are. There's no convenient river to drop it into if there's any alarm——"

"What alarm can there be?" he asked impatiently.

"Franklin Parry, perhaps. He seemed to distress you," she taunted him.

He winced. "I didn't mean it that way," he said.

"Well, I meant it in whatever way you did," she retorted with a sugary smile. "What's the hurry, Max? The weather looks like breaking; it's bound to be dark to-night or to-morrow."

"I want to get it away from the church," he said.

"Damn it all, Bill, I mean, we don't want to chance our luck too far. Something might happen. . . ."

"So it might in my garden," she answered. "If you want to bring the stuff by car, you'll bring it yourself, and bring it into the house yourself. We'll share the risks, Max; but I don't take them all myself—unless I take all the money."

Once more they argued, and once more Bill won her point. Though the parson pooh-poohed her objections to the very end, she would not move. And again, with bad grace, he submitted.

It was arranged that the car should call to collect a gate-legged table which the parson should have bought.

"I'll have the thing packed, openly, before you come," she said threateningly. "And you'll take it away with you, too. What you do with it is your business. You'd better leave it as a present for old Britain—you owe him some reward. And remember this, Max, I go on living here, you don't. The firm of William Cook has got to be above suspicion."

"Have it your own way, Bill," he agreed at last. "I believe in detail. Perhaps you're right." Her touch about leaving a present for the Rector of Bidely amused him, particularly as Bill would be paying for it.

III

The Rev. Clement Foster walked, in his ambling way, down the lane from The Pines towards Oldford, and ran into Franklin Parry at the corner.

Parry was having trouble with the Fowler and was filling the tank.

"I thought she'd just get me home, but she wouldn't," he explained to the parson, who had greeted him with his most ingenuous smile. "Now, if the old bus will move; if I can give you a lift anywhere, jump in, sir."

The parson was very grateful.

"I don't understand the mechanism of these things at all," he said, "but I admit to finding them very useful. I'm lunching alone at the Palace. Would you favour me with your company?"

Parry looked pleasantly surprised.

"Very kind of you, indeed, sir," he answered. "My friend Culver's away for the day—in fact, it's his car I've borrowed. I'm in a bit of a mess"—he displayed his oil-stained hands—"but if I may just run you to the hotel, and then push the bus into the garage, I'd be delighted."

"Splendid," the parson beamed. "So good of you to take pity on a lonely man."

Parry drained the tin, and rescrewed the top.

"And how's that heart of yours now, sir? I was very worried about it last time we met."

The parson reassured him. He laughed apologetically.

"A poor welcome I gave you then," he said, and added with an intimate little chuckle, "But I'll try to make up for it to-day. And isn't it a curious coincidence," he went on, a look of childlike amusement spreading over his plump face, "I have but this

minute left Mrs. Coke, when she insisted upon replacing that vase her ferocious dog broke. Isn't that odd, now?"

"That is curious," Parry agreed. "I don't know whether I bring you good or bad luck, Mr. Foster."

"Oh, good. Certainly good. Mrs. Coke has replaced my shattered treasure with one much better. But I didn't get off scot-free. No, no." There was a touch of disapproval in his smile. "That very business-like lady saw to it that I bought something else. She has financial genius, Mrs. Coke, and her prices are for the wealthy."

As they drove to the Palace, the parson recounted, prosily, how he was leaving a little souvenir behind for Mr. Britain. In the narrow High Street they passed a heated-looking young parson bicycling slowly along. Mr. Foster broke off in the middle of his narrative to wave to the curate, and forgot the thread of his earlier story, as he began to tell of his meeting with this young man at the rectory an hour or so ago.

"Such an interesting young fellow," he described him, "and quite an authority on old glass. I showed him the treasures of St. Nicholas, and he was so pleased. He taught me quite a lot. He says those windows are worth a very great deal." The parson looked knowing and impressed.

"I suppose they would be," Parry agreed in the polite manner of one who has no ideas on the subject whatever. He left Foster at the door of the hotel with a cheery, "I'll be back in about ten minutes, sir," and drove to the Blue Boar, nearly knocking the amiable curate off his bicycle as he backed into the garage.

CHAPTER XXIII

I

A COLD sea-mist, driving in from the sea, enveloped Oldford when Dick Culver emerged from the six o'clock train that evening. Bill Coke had been right : the weather was breaking.

But despite the harsh, penetrating drizzle, Culver determined to walk to the hotel. He put his bag in the town omnibus, and set off down the hill welcoming, rather than resenting, the inclemency of the night. It fitted his mood of disillusionment and uncertainty ; it gave him a perverted sort of pleasure to feel the dank rain driving on his face.

Here was Oldford without the tinselled make-believe of holiday skies and holiday crowds : a drab, workaday place open to the pitiless east winds and the hungry sea, which, each year, stole a yard or two more from the land. Culver thought that life was very much like that, a cruel, merciless business, fighting stubbornly to engulf the peaceful ideals of comfort and the fitness of things, which man's foolish mind evolved.

At least it was so to him. A grey thing like that indistinguishable medley of sea and sky that showed beyond the houses. The faint, despondent note of a fog-horn from a distant lightship drifted through the mist, and he hated the mournful wail, though it soothed him.

It was not until he turned into the High Street, a few yards from the Palace Hotel, that he made a sudden decision. Instinctively he felt that if he saw Parry, he would fall again under that incomprehensible man's curious sway. Parry had a numbing effect upon him, he inspired a false confidence which

destroyed initiative. He was so plausible in manner, in atmosphere, rather than in words. And Culver wanted, then, to trust to his own instinct rather than to the vague assurances of his friend.

The lights of the hotel, turned on to dispel the gloom of the evening, blinked at him cheerfully. Ann might be there. He decided to see Ann if she were, despite Parry's hints. Parry's interest in her was secondary to his own scheme of vengeance; Culver's interest was very personal.

They told him at the office that Miss Gray was in, and that she would be down in a few moments. Culver felt relieved. He had thought, after he had inquired for her, that she might refuse to see him, for they had last parted in unusual circumstances; she driving off, leaving him, tricked, to walk back to Oldford.

But she came into the lounge, smiling conventionally, and greeted him without any reference to their last embarrassing meeting.

"Rotten night, isn't it?" she said, distinctly self-conscious. "I've got the glooms. What brings you here, Richard Culver?"

She looked terribly tired he noticed, and more mature than he had ever seen her. Her eyes were dark-circled, and her manner listless. He thought he traced despair in the way she blatantly ignored their last meeting, and there was an intangible something about her which made him feel that she mistrusted him, but was too weary to fight any longer.

He reacted to her mood, which was so much akin to his own. He made no effort at dissembling, but answered her frankly :

"I have something to tell you that must affect you—affect your happiness—tremendously. Once, you asked me to—to justify my slanders." He saw that she was intensely interested. The old, keen alertness was back in her eyes, but she made no comment.

"Well, I can do it, Ann," he continued. "I want to justify what I said—to you. And I think, perhaps, you may be glad, after all."

She looked about her thoughtfully. They were alone in the lounge save for a couple of elderly women knitting by the fireplace. To his relief, Ann answered slowly :

"All right. I'll listen. That's only fair. But—but this isn't quite the place for serious talking, is it?" She smiled in an uneasy way. "Wait a minute, I'll get a coat."

Ann was back in a few moments, snuggling into heavy furs, and they went out into the misty twilight of the verandah, where cold wisps of drizzle swept in from the sea and the regular moaning of the distant siren accentuated the dreariness of the evening.

Ann fixed a chair so as to get as much shelter as she could, and then, with a touch of her old raillery, she said :

"There are not likely to be any other fools in Oldford who'd sit out here in this weather. We shan't be disturbed. Carry on and be quick. It's cold."

He dropped into a chair beside her, glad now, and determined to sacrifice every other consideration if he could only persuade her to cut loose from Bill Coke. He knew she was miserable, he felt that she was frightened, and she was giving him the opportunity that he had longed for—to help her.

"Ann," he began very quietly, "have you ever heard of the Reverend Clement Foster——"

"Of course I have," she interrupted. "That old thing at Bidely."

"No, my dear," he corrected her. "Not that rogue at all. But a poor devil who died at St. Gules last August. I was with him when he died. Once he was Bill Coke's husband."

"Say that all over again," Ann drawled. She was

plainly excited, but she was doing her best to pretend to a mere casual interest.

Culver elaborated his story.

"I tell you that man at Bidely is an impudent fraud," he explained. "The real Clement Foster was a poor wretch who had sunk right down to the bottom. And his wife, your friend, was responsible for it. I haven't the slightest doubt of that."

"I know. I know." Ann put in. "You believe it. But can you prove it?"

"I can," he answered hastily. "I can give you a photograph of the man, and you can face Bill Coke with it, if you like. Or I will. And I've got the whole story of his fall—and his end. I'll tell you what his end was. I've told nobody else."

He recounted the last sad scene of old Jean's life, and Ann listened without a word until he finished.

"Pretty rotten for him," she commented at last. Her voice sounded trivial, and it jarred on him. "And you brought this letter to Bill. Did she say what it was about?"

He told her that part of the story, and something of the real Clement Foster's early life as he had heard it at Llanhurst and at Wandle End.

"But that's not the point, Ann," he went on seriously. "I'm trying to show you that this woman is bad—thoroughly bad. And the thing that may help you in this. If she's got a hold over you, and I believe she has, this may get you out of it. She married Wilfred Coke, and he, poor devil! drank himself to death, and I've heard something of that story, too. I don't believe Bill Coke was ever divorced. You see what that means. I know it's rotten to use threats, but you've got to fight these people in their own way."

"Yes," Ann agreed quietly.

"And—and——" He was going the whole hog now. "Ann, haven't you any—any suspicions about

how Mrs. Coke earns her living? I mean this antique business. Is it genuine? That fellow Mingay, and Elsa Mayer—they're not straight, you know. And the parson at Bidely. Don't you think it's funny that he should be here under that name?"

In the deepening dusk he could not see her face. She was looking down, her head sunk in the tall collar of her coat. But her silence encouraged him.

"The crash is bound to come," he urged so gravely. "And you may be dragged down in it. Don't think for a minute I blame you, my dear. It is just the excitement you liked; the playing with danger. The unknown. You told me as much once. And now perhaps you've gone too far. So far that you think you can't go back. But you can. Honestly, you can. Won't you tell me—won't you confide in me?"

Still she made no answer. He looked up at her, and she was sitting absolutely motionless, and for once she appealed to him as weak, unable to look after herself.

"I want you to go away—to-night," he pleaded. "Leave me to settle with Mrs. Coke. Tell me the truth, and I'll see to it she doesn't interfere with you. If you'll promise, I'll go off to her now, and tell her all I know about Wandle End and old Jean. I'll deal with her. I've no pity left for the woman after what I have learned in the past few weeks."

Ann woke suddenly to life.

"No, you mustn't. You mustn't," she said, and she was really agitated. "That wouldn't do any good. You must leave me to settle with her."

"But will you?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes. I will." She spoke in a slow, uncertain way. "I really will," she added in a conciliatory tone that did not quite convince him. She laughed, and the laugh rang false.

"It will be all right now," she went on. "After what you've told me."

"Then you were mixed up with her—her real life?" he asked, half in fear, half in relief.

Ann nodded. "Yes," she faltered.

Culver sighed. He was glad to get the confession, but desperately frightened. Suddenly it came to him that Harris and Parry might be acting at any moment. Perhaps they were waiting at this second, at The Pines, to trap Ann. A dozen hideous possibilities flooded into his brain.

"Then you mustn't go near her again," he said sharply. "I know what I'm talking about, my dear, and you must trust me. That crash is—is closer than perhaps you think. You must go at once. They are going to—to arrest her."

The secret was out, but he was reckless now. It did not weigh a straw with him then, if all of Parry's schemes should go astray, so long as he could save Ann the degradation that threatened her.

He spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, putting his thoughts into words the moment he conceived them.

"We'll go, you and I, now," he said. "I'll drive you to Harwich. We'll get the night boat over. Then I'll come back and see how things are. Don't worry, dear, I'll look after you. I don't care what you've done, it wasn't the real you that did it. You've just got into a mess—that's all. And it will blow over——"

She tried to stop him, but he seemed unconscious of her protest.

"She may try to implicate you—Bill Coke. But I think I can stop that. How far have you gone, Ann? Please be frank. Has she mixed you up in this Bidely business. I know—pretty well all about it——"

"Oh, don't! Don't!" she broke in. "You mustn't talk like this. It isn't as bad as you think. Honest, it isn't."

Her voice was breaking, and there was anger mingled with the distress of her words.

"You've done everything, everything," she insisted. "I see the importance—the enormous importance—of what you've told me. And Bill will see it, too. She daren't say a word now—now that I know. You've been wonderful. And so kind——" Her words were coming in quick, jerky effort, so utterly unlike the lazy, confident manner of the Ann Gray he had known. "You mustn't worry. I'm tremendously grateful to you. You've—you've got me out of a horrible mess——"

Dick Culver listened, and knew that he had failed. He had not convinced Ann. She was honestly grateful to him, he did not doubt—her manner showed that clearly—but she was trying to placate him; trying to be kind, as one is kind to a child who has tried to please and blundered badly in the attempt. Culver was hurt, and filled with a terrible despondency. Every hope he had a few moments before had vanished.

"Ann, dear, don't lie to me," he said quietly. "You don't mean to go to Bill Coke at all—at least, not as you say you will. You're only trying to put me off. But I'm not going to be put off. I had hoped you'd let me help you; but if you won't—I shall go on and do what I can, despite you. I don't care if you hate me for it. You see, Ann, I love you."

He heard her draw in her breath with a little gasp of pain. He saw her, dimly, saw her effort to jump to her feet, her hesitancy, and the final effort that succeeded. And then she was standing before him, her head averted, and her voice low and muffled.

"Don't make me make a cad of myself, as well as a fool," she said, and she laughed. And the laugh, more than her words, suggested to him the utmost depths of misery. It was tragic; full of mockery and hopelessness.

He was on his feet, too, with a mad idea of taking

her away by force—anywhere. He believed she did care for him, did appreciate what he had said, but that circumstances were stronger than desire. He forced himself to be calm.

"Ann, you're coming away with me, now," he said. She stamped her foot.

"Don't! Don't! Don't!" she cried. "Why can't you be sensible? I'll do all the things you want me to do. Stay here, stay here for ten minutes while I—I telephone. Will you do that for me?"

"Perhaps. If you'll promise to come back."

"Of course I will. Only I don't want a scene." She was recovering herself quickly.

"What are you going to telephone about?"

"About—about what you've told me."

"That—on the telephone?" he queried incredulously.

"Not in so many words, you dear, sweet idiot," she expostulated. "But I can do what I want to do, if you'll only leave me alone. You can't understand—it's so complicated. Oh, won't you trust me even that little?"

"Ann, you swear you'll break with that woman?" He was terribly grave.

"Yes. Yes," she said.

Culver did not believe her.

"Or are you going to tell her what I have told you?" he went on. He could not keep the bitterness of defeat out of his voice. "Are you going to give her the tip to clear off quickly? Oh, I don't care a damn if you do, so long as you come back and never see her again."

Ann pulled her coat about her. She seemed to be shivering. Then she answered, with something of her old mockery:

"My dear boy, you've got no option. You see you've put all the cards into my hands, and I can play

them as I like. Bill knows just as well as you do that something's gone wrong. You see, it's rather important to her. But if you make a fuss now—well, I tell you frankly, you'll get me into trouble, too. That's honest. If you want to do that, go ahead. If you don't—do what I ask you. Stay here till I've telephoned."

He could see no alternative. Her confession confirmed his fears. But by doing as Ann asked him, it seemed that he would at least give her a chance to escape.

"All right," he said gruffly, dropping back into his chair. "Go on, I'll wait. But I'm awful sorry, Ann. Awful sorry——"

But Ann had gone.

II

She hurried through the lounge and went straight for the telephone, seeming to shrink into the warm depth of her furs as a protection from any prying, inquisitive eyes.

But even when she reached the instrument she hesitated, frowning, and staring in a puzzled way at the dull wall of the cabinet. For a moment she appeared to abandon her first intention, then, with decision, she grabbed the receiver from its hook and called: "Hallo," nervously and impatiently.

It was not Bill Coke's number that she demanded so urgently, when the answer came to her call, but the Blue Boar, but a few hundred yards away, and of the porter there she asked sharply:

"Is Mr. Parry in—Mr. Franklin Parry? Tell him Mr. Culver wants to speak to him if he is."

In a few moments Franklin Parry's even voice came over the wire.

"Hallo, old man. Where are you speaking from?" he asked.

Ann interrupted:

"That you, F. P.? No, it's not Culver, it's me—Ann. Listen. I had to ring. I'm over at the Palace, and Culver's here. I've got to see you at once—he's blabbing the whole business and a lot more. It's really urgent. What shall I do? Come to you?—you'd better not come here."

She spoke in a low, businesslike voice, but she could not entirely control the emotion in it.

Parry answered, without hesitation :

"You're quite right," he said. "Yes, come over here at once. I'll be waiting for you." And he rang off.

Ann scurried through the driving mist along the dimly lighted High Street. She was hatless, and the rain beat cold on her flushed face, and formed in little beads of moisture on her furs.

Parry, lounging just inside the doorway of the Blue Boar, greeted her with no sign of embarrassment. He made some easy comment on the harshness of the weather, and asked whether she would rather leave her coat downstairs or bring it up to his sitting-room.

"I think I'll keep it; it's so cold," she answered, pulling the coat close about her. But her eyebrows lifted in inquiry.

Parry read her unspoken question, and smiled in his odd, slow way.

"Yes," he said. "We couldn't very well talk down here, could we? I booked the sitting-room after you rang. They're lighting a fire now, and it will be cosy there."

"You don't waste time, F. P.," she replied, with appreciation.

A maidservant rose from her knees, by the crackling fire, as they entered.

"I think it will go all right, sir," she said.

Parry assured her that he was certain it would, and helped Ann out of her coat. It was a pleasant room,

with old-fashioned furniture and grim Victorian steel engravings on the walls. Parry pulled the sofa in front of the blaze for her.

"You've been having a bad time," he said, looking sharply at Ann. "You've done about enough. What's this new move?" He leaned on the mantel-shelf, pulling solemnly at his pipe. "I didn't know Culver was back."

"He came straight from the station to me." Ann was gazing wide-eyed at the fire. "He's tumbled on a most amazing story, F. P. He's got Bill's history from A to Z. That man Jean, at St. Gules—he was the real Clement Foster——"

Parry removed his pipe and whistled.

"That's pretty grimy," he said. "She's a nastier woman than I thought. What else?"

Ann recounted Culver's story. "But the important point is," she finished, looking up at Parry, with her face drawn in the attempt at control, "that he'll go straight to Bill and tell her. Tell her the whole blessed affair, and she'll be off like a shot. And that oily brute at Bidely, too. I don't see how I can stop him. It's—oh, it's damnable, F. P. I'm sick of it all, I wish I'd never come into it——"

"I know. I know," he said, in a soothing voice, "You like the hunting, but you don't like the killing. I've felt like that, too, sometimes."

"It isn't only that," she persisted, her distress surely getting the upper hand; "I feel such a filthy little beast. It's all right with Bill Coke's crowd, I'll lie to them to the last fence—but Mr. Culver—you can't quite understand, F. P. He's been so infernally decent to me. I mean, when he does find out—well, if I were him I think I'd want to kill me." She smiled at her mixed phrase. "You know what I mean—to find out after you've been playing absolutely fair, that you'd been cheated all the time——"

She broke off abruptly, with a tired gesture.

Parry looked worried.

"I'll make it all right, Ann," he said, after a few moments. "He'll probably take it out on me first—and I won't blame him."

"You can't make it all right," she argued. "Why the devil we couldn't have told him in the first place, I don't see. I wanted to—— I jolly nearly did once. Harris is such an old woman. Why, Dick Culver's found out more than he has—without knowing it." Ann's voice was full of disgust.

"Perhaps that was Mr. Harris' idea," Parry answered through a cloud of smoke. "Our Mr. Harris doesn't consider feelings. He makes use of people. Cruel fellow, Harris; but I like him."

Ann sighed.

"Well, anyhow, what are we going to do now? I tell you I'm pretty well done. I've got that poor boy waiting over there for me to go back to him, and I've got to tell him something. He thinks I'm phoning Bill; he hopes I'm getting myself out of her toils." Again that faint mirthless laughter. "But I tell you this: I simply won't go back and lie to him any more; I'm fed up with it. Pringle's can do what they like. I won't take any pay. I've done my last job for them; but I don't want to spoil this one, unless you two make me. . . . Oh, gosh! F. P., can't you think of something?"

"Won't you stick it for another twenty-four hours?" Parry asked in a perplexed voice. "It'll be all over then."

Ann's forehead puckered with impatience.

"But you won't realise that I don't see how I can hold him for twenty-four hours. He's as stubborn as a mule. He'll chuck you all over unless we tell him the truth. He's—he's as good as told me so." Ann flushed.

A flicker of amusement and sympathy showed in Franklin Parry's normally emotionless eyes.

"Has he now?" he said. "Well, I'm not surprised. He as good as told me so not very long ago. He's been terribly worried about you, Ann."

Ann's flush deepened.

"Don't be an ass!" she retorted. "This isn't the moment for cheap jokes, F. P. If that's all you've got to say, I'm sorry to break my contract, but I'm going straight back to tell him the facts. It will be a rotten job, but it's rottener not to. Then I'm clearing right off, and you and Harris can sweep up the mess." She jumped up and looked about for her coat, but Parry laid a paternal, restraining hand upon her shoulder.

"Wait a minute, Ann," he said in that convincing manner of his. "Let's think a minute. I wonder if I can get hold of Harris? He won't want to lose Culver till it's all over—and you don't want to lose him, do you? Stay here like a good girl; I won't let you down."

Franklin Parry went from the room before Ann had a chance to reply, and she seemed content to let him go. To her, it was easier to allow things to take their course than to fight against them. Life was so terribly complicated, and she had grown very tired in the last hours.

III

Parry was back in a few minutes. Ann was sitting in a stiff, uneasy position, blinking stupidly at the fire. She seemed hardly conscious of his return.

He had adopted a bluff, alien manner that should have betrayed to her his uneasiness. But she merely looked towards him in a docile way, and asked rather bitterly: "Have you done anything?"

"Lots," he answered laconically. "I'll have our Mr. Harris here soon. We'll talk to him, Ann. I

agree, he's a little too official—and he prides himself on being unconventional."

"But you'll only talk," she said peevishly. "He'll say what his experience is, and I don't care a hoot for his experience. After all, F. P., I haven't sold myself body and soul to his blessed firm. I've done my job. I don't think I'll wait till he comes; I'd only be rude to him. And whatever he says will make no difference. Honestly, I don't care now whether you get this crowd or not."

"Don't be silly," Parry urged. "You're getting sentimental, Ann."

"I'm not," she said defiantly. "I'm just fed up with the whole business. I've had weeks of it, and I was supposed to be finished now."

"Well, don't blame me," he retorted. "Blame the devoted Richard——"

"Oh, leave him out of it," Ann said with petulance. Then ingenuously: "And if I don't get back to him quick, I tell you you'll both be dished. No, I'm going, F. P. Tell Harris what you like."

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, my child; go on, then," he said. "I can't stop you. But you might tell me what you propose to do. You see, it makes a difference. Are you going back to say: 'Richard, dear, I've been one of Pringle's detectives all the time, and please I'm very sorry I've made a fool of you'? I would if I were you. He'll like it so much."

Ann refused at first to react to the gibe.

"Something of that kind," she said, with apparent indifference.

"Women always go back on their promises," Parry put in provocatively.

"They don't," she retorted angrily. "It's the only way I can see out of this muddle—and you can't put up a better suggestion, can you?" She faced him like

a rebellious child, fearful to accept the responsibility of her own decision.

He argued with her fatuously, striving to confuse the issue. And she, in her uncertain mood, let herself be led into inconsequent dispute. To her, Franklin Parry seemed then so unreasonable and unjust. His cynical allusions to Richard Culver annoyed her, for Culver's frankness had made her feel inexpressibly mean. She had tricked him for weeks, tricked him into saying that he loved her.

Ann saw little fun or excitement left in the detective work which once had appealed so strongly to her sense of adventure. Now it seemed just a sordid, lying trade of Judas smiles and furtive prying.

Footsteps sounded from the corridor, and Parry went over to the door with a complacent smirk, Ann thought. She realised then, that all his captious argument had been mere subterfuge to keep her until Harris came, so that he might influence her. After all, Mr. Harris was her immediate chief. It was he who insisted upon the secrecy which had landed her in this ghastly position with Dick Culver. He would still insist; she knew his stubborn, superior way. He would recall the terms of her agreement. Ann glared at Parry when a knock on the door sounded.

"It was a rotten trick, F. P.," she said.

Parry called "Come in" without heeding her comment, and Ann, staring sullenly at the door, felt her heart jump and the blood flooding her cheeks in sudden embarrassment at the sight of Dick Culver's grave and puzzled face as he entered the room and looked with suspicious inquiry from Ann to Parry, then back again to Ann.

Parry grinned in frank enjoyment of the comedy. Ann, in her confusion, had averted her face, and Culver read in her manner shame.

"What's all this mean?" he demanded harshly,

turning to Parry. There was terrible fear welling up in his mind. This meeting could betoken only one thing—Parry had arrested Ann.

In a flash he saw the whole tragedy. Ann had been given the tip by Bill, perhaps, on the telephone. Or perhaps they had already taken Bill, and Ann had bolted despairingly for his hotel and had sent for him to help her at the crisis.

That's what that extraordinary message from her, they had brought to him on the verandah of the Palace, must mean. "Miss Gray is at the Blue Boar and wants you to go over to her at once," the messenger had said.

"You let me down after all?" he went on savagely, angered at Parry's triumphant smile.

Ann was breaking down; he could just see her mouth twitching and her hands picking feverishly at the fur of her coat.

Parry nodded.

"Yes, old man, I have rather," he said in a cynical way. "I had to. You see, Ann had involved herself rather badly over this Pines business. She's not allowed to tell you the facts; she's engaged not to." A smile of childlike innocence was spreading over Parry's lean face. "So have I, for that matter, but I propose to break my engagement. Culver, old man, don't worry about Ann; she's one of Pringle's smartest detectives. She's been after Bill Coke for months. Now then, Ann, tell him all about it. I really am going to get on to Harris this time."

IV

Culver gaped stupidly at Ann. For the moment he could not quite take in the significance of Parry's extraordinary statement.

The door closed, and Ann looked up slowly with distress and shame plainly showing in her big hazel eyes.

"Well?" she said. "Go on. Say it. I don't care. I had to fool you; it was part of my job. I'm sorry. I can't say any more."

But still he gazed at her in silent incredulity. It was dawning on him now. All his fears and ghastly apprehensions were groundless. The growing sense of relief seemed to numb his brain. What a complete idiot the girl must have thought him! What a gorgeous fool he had made of himself over there at the Palace, begging her so earnestly to escape from a danger that had never existed!

Ann's mouth was twitching again.

"Oh, gosh! For the Lord's sake say something," she broke out hysterically. "I tell you I couldn't help it. You'd have had to do the same yourself."

Culver found his tongue.

"But what can I say?" he asked vaguely. "I'm glad; you don't know how glad I am. But please forgive me—what I said to you earlier. Over there—at the hotel. It was a pretty rotten thing to suggest. I couldn't bring myself to believe it—really. Yet it looked so queer. And I'd have done anything to have helped you out of the trouble I—I was fool enough to think you were in."

Ann was flaming with humiliation.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" she exclaimed sharply. "It was awfully decent of you, magnificently decent. I felt such a devastating cad. Do be generous and forget it all. It will make it easier for me. Let's pretend it never happened. Look here, Mr. Culver, I've got to hang about here till to-morrow, but I'm going to clear off then, honest. I loath this place." She shivered, and her words were coming quickly. "I'm going to Beth, and I'm through with this rotten trade."

I only went into it for fun. It sounded so much more exciting than other jobs—so novel——”

“But who are you—really?” he asked in bewilderment.

She stamped her foot.

“I’m Ann—Ann Gray,” she answered impatiently. “I never lied to you about that. It was only that I couldn’t tell you what I was up to. Oh, do be sensible and don’t gape at me like that. I don’t want you to be kind to me. But you needn’t look your loathing; you might speak it.”

She hardly knew what she was saying. Her nerves were frayed to ribbons, and all the time there were echoing in her memory his pleading, earnest words, spoken so honestly in the dusk and mist on the verandah. The way in which he had offered, quietly, to sacrifice everything for her. His simple phrase: “You see, Ann, I love you.”

And now he must hate her. Quite rightly, too, she told herself. Only it had gone beyond bearing to see him standing there looking so hurt and disillusioned.

“I don’t loath you,” he protested. “My dear, can’t you understand——”

Ann would not let him finish. She read into his tone merely a chivalrous determination to abide by the confession into which she had tricked him.

“No, I don’t,” she said roughly. “And I don’t want to. I’ve said I’m sorry, and I am sorry. But now the whole thing’s ended. And—and——”

She got no further. She could not trust herself another moment.

“And good-bye,” she added, rushing for the door.

Before he could stop her, or expostulate, she had gone, and he swung round, like a man dazed, to see only the white panels of the closed door and to hear her hurrying footsteps fading in the distance.

Franklin Parry found him standing in exactly the same position when he returned a few minutes later. Parry glanced quickly about the room.

"Hullo! Where's Ann?" he asked.

"She's gone," Culver answered dully.

"What's up?" Parry queried.

"Oh, I don't know." Culver walked slowly across the room and dropped on to the sofa. "I didn't imagine she'd want to have much to say to me after the infernal idiot I've made of myself. You don't know what I said to that girl this evening. I told her I knew she was a crook and—oh, well, it doesn't matter a damn now. You might explain a bit more if you will. I'd like to know exactly what sized idiot I've made of myself." He laughed bitterly and took a cigarette from his case with a savage jerk.

"Well, old man," Parry said thoughtfully, "there's not much more to tell, is there? We've all been mighty sorry for you, because you've been so damned useful, but we've had to keep you out of it. I don't know that we were right, but there it was. What Harris said had to go."

"Never mind about me," Culver protested. "What about Ann? What's her part? You don't mean to say she's a professional detective?"

"She is. And a pretty smart one, too."

"But why? She's got plenty of money."

"A modern girl's whim. Craving for excitement. Poor kid, she's had more than her fill of that. This job was a bit too big for her, though, by Gad! she's handled it like a master."

"How?" Culver demanded laconically.

Parry blew a huge cloud of smoke.

"Well, you see, old man, she started with some potty little case up in town. Went as a cook and got some first-class information, Harris says. And she came to know Bill Coke in that job, and when they

got a little suspicious about that dear lady's activities, they sent Ann down here to carry on the good work."

Culver nodded. He was intensely interested in Ann's astounding story.

"All she was asked to do was to report on Bill's friends," Parry went on. "Have an eye to her—customers. The people who came and went. That's how we got on to you."

"Me?" Culver asked in astonishment.

"Yes, you. Ann had you down for a really bright wrong 'un." Parry grinned. "She was worried about you, because your visit upset Bill. Perhaps you don't remember that she got out of you when you were going back to St. Gules." His eyes twinkled. "Anyhow, she did, and I was over in Antwerp at the time, on the track of Mingay—I speak that lingo, you know—and they wired me to pick you up at St. Gules. Actually, I first laid eyes on you when you came off the Ostend boat that evening; then I followed you to the Grande at the Plage, and when you went down to the fishing town the next morning I thought I'd got a whale in you, old man, particularly when you went on to the Rue Jan Hoeck in Antwerp, where I had located my pal Mingay."

Parry chuckled to himself, as much at the memory as at Culver's blank gaze of indignant amazement.

"I've told you the rest," he said. "And how useful you've been to us. Harris has a great admiration for you."

"Oh, damn Harris," Culver interrupted. "I want to know some more about Ann. You mean to say you've been in communication with her all the time I've been down here?"

"I'm afraid I have. I, or Harris," Parry admitted. "It was she who took the Plomesgate cottage, when she first came down here. She thought it might be a good funk hole for herself. And she did in the car,

you know, at Covehaven. That was a useful bit of work, but clumsy. One of her few failures—your guessing. But it gave us a good hour to prow! round The Pines with that infernal dog away. We got some interesting information out of that boathouse. And another thing, now we're having a heart to heart talk. Remember a very good dinner we had here once?" Culver smiled reminiscently.

"I'm afraid I had to make you a bit tight to get you out of the way that night. You see, Ann had been following Elsa Mayer to London—only she went to Harwich and met Carl Mingay there—and she was telephoning to me that night, and you might have been too curious. I spent the next morning watching Carl. Ann's worked hard on this job, and you complicated things a lot; we never knew when you were going to pop up. We'd have been wiser to have told you."

Parry elaborated his story with incidents of how he or Ann had managed to nurse Culver when they wanted him out of the way. He told how Ann had deliberately marooned him on the beach, after setting fire to the heather, and then driven like mad to Parry with the news of his talk to Beth and an urgent appeal to get him away from Oldford for fear that he might alarm Bill Coke.

"So we sent Harris to wait for you when you walked back and bring you over to Plomesgate. And we decided on the tower as an afterthought. Just as well we did. You've got an uncanny knack of finding things out in this case. Honestly, if it hadn't been for you, I don't believe we'd ever have tumbled to the Bidely parson. He's deep, that fellow."

Culver looked weary. It was terribly confusing and humiliating to learn how completely he had been deceived.

"I suppose you are—who you said you were?" he

asked with a bitter laugh. "I seem to have got into a nightmare."

Franklin Parry's expression softened. He seemed really sorry for Culver's plight.

"Yes. I've told you the truth. Harris may curse me, but I don't care. It's practically all over now. And, by Gad! if you don't feel too sore about it all, I'd be awfully glad if you'd come and put in a week or two at Carey. I haven't too many friends—and there's some fairish shooting." There was something rather pathetic about his tone, that odd diffidence and shyness which rarely forced its way through his normal, emotionless indifference. "But perhaps you'd rather not," he went on before Culver could reply. "You'd probably be bored. Some other time, perhaps——"

Culver felt Parry's sensitiveness; the quick way in which he tried to turn what he imagined to be an unwelcome topic. And all his earlier sympathy for this queer, chance companion of his returned. The real Franklin Parry, hidden behind this cynical veneer, would be a very likeable fellow and a loyal friend.

"Why, of course, I'll come," he said, for the first time that evening in his natural voice. "Don't be an ass. Nothing I'd like better. I'll start now, if you like, and drive you back in your own car."

Parry looked really surprised, and a strange smile broke slowly on his thin face.

"You mean it, old man?" he said. "Gad! that's good hearing. You don't know how welcome you'll be."

"I'm not doubting my welcome," Culver said. "But when do we get off? I've seen about all I want to of Oldford."

Parry's face was grave again.

"Have to wait till to-morrow, I'm afraid," he said. "I've got to stand by Harris until the end."

"And when is the end?" Culver asked.

"Some time to-morrow, Harris reckons. We ought to get the lot. Everything's ready——"

A servant came to the door announcing that Mr. Parry was wanted on the telephone.

"That'll be Harris; he's probably got news. Wait here, old man, I'll be back in a few minutes," Parry said.

But Franklin Parry was back almost before Culver realised that he had gone. He pushed open the door and spoke quickly, hardly entering the room. There was animation in his expression for once, the light of excitement.

"Something's gone wrong," he said sharply. "Carry on with dinner, I may be some time." Then he had disappeared, leaving Dick Culver experiencing yet another of the wild surprises that fateful day was producing.

The next came swift on its heels. Culver had only just begun his dinner when he, himself, was called to the telephone.

He went from the dining-room conscious of much of that same excitement that had shown in Parry's face. He had been suffering a strong reaction, a sudden feeling of disappointment that he was to have no part in the climax of this work of Parry's and Harris' and Ann's. While he had been sitting there solemnly at the table his mind had been straying in curious wonder, trying to imagine what his associates were doing.

Something had gone wrong, Parry had said. Did that mean Bill and the parson had escaped? He hoped not. Now that he had had a chance to sift things out, quietly, he was able better to appreciate the patience with which these people had undertaken their laborious task. He had thought, too, of Bill

Coke and Jean, and wondered that he had made no reference to Miss Cupper's revelation to Parry. Somehow he seemed to have lost grip of things; he had been so much absorbed in his own feelings that he had entirely forgotten the subject which earlier in the day had dominated the whole of his thoughts.

Would this be Parry on the phone, he asked himself; Parry to say that it was all over? That they had arrested Bill—he thought of Mrs. Coke, the smart, attractive, self-possessed Bill. It seemed incredible that she might now be a frantic, despairing woman in custody at the red-brick police-station a hundred yards along the High Street. Despite what he knew of her, he hated the thought.

Or would it be Ann? That was a new idea—and a very welcome one. If it were Ann, recovered from her strain, to say that she wanted to see him! If she would only give him a chance, now that he had found his wits again, to tell her how much she meant to him. But Ann wouldn't do that. She must be sick of him. The man who had been fool enough to think that she was mixed up with people like Carl Mingay and Bill Coke in their felonious life!

Culver picked up the telephone nervously.

"Hallo," he said. "Richard Culver speaking. Who is that?"

Bill Coke's voice answered. It was harsh and staccato.

"Mr. Culver, please come to The Pines at once. I must see you. I must. You will come, won't you? Promise me. It's something extremely important. You will, please say you will?"

Hardly knowing what he answered, Culver said: "Yes. I'll come."

CHAPTER XXIV

I

BILL COKE had set the stage deftly for the reception of the parson that evening. She was alone in the house. Even the dour, elderly maid had been sent to "the pictures."

The gate-legged table stood, roughly crated, just inside the front door, and Bill herself hovered about anxiously as the time drew near, conscious of her nerves, which did not often oppress her in times of action.

It made her angry, for she had a hard and delicate task ahead, packing away the glass, when it came, in that cunningly devised hiding-place, upon which she had spent so much labour in the past weeks. She smoked incessantly, growing more and more restless and vaguely apprehensive.

She had been a fool, she told herself, to agree to this scheme of Max's. The river was the safest way; then there was no need even to have the stuff openly in the house for more than half an hour, and there was always the convenient river to receive it if any trouble should arise. But now——

A ring at the bell sent her dashing nervously to the front door. But it was only the evening post, the mail which had arrived in Oldford by the same train which had brought Dick Culver from London. She glanced through the letters swiftly, and picked out one that bore a French stamp and was addressed in Elsa Mayer's spidery script.

Bill read it and frowned. Elsa's phrases were guarded, but they conveyed unmistakable warning. Someone was making too pertinent inquiries, she

indicated, and she and Carl had parted company for a time. Elsa had gone to Paris and Carl to Hamburg. Bill Coke looked ten years older as she tore up the letter and dropped it piece by piece on to the fire.

She glanced up, in a scared way, at the clock. It was getting late. The parson should have been there long before this; it was after half-past seven. She went to the door and stood, shivering, gazing into the misty darkness and listening anxiously for the sound of approaching wheels.

The wind was rising, and it blew slashes of cold rain on to her face; the trees were sighing and whispering mournfully. Water was dripping irritatingly from a choked gutter somewhere in the front of the house, and that gloomy fog-horn, which Bill had always hated so intensely, added its share to the dejection of the night.

Bill could not endure this waiting. There was something terribly ominous about it all—the calm before the storm. She fancied she saw figures moving in the shrubbery, and she went for Dirk and sent him ranging the garden, but he found nothing. Then the telephone bell rang, and she cried out in alarm as she started at its piercing insistence.

But she schooled herself to her normal, quiet "Hallo" when she answered the call. "Mrs. Coke speaking. Who is that?" she said in a low, even tone, though her face was lined and drawn and one hand beat a fretful tattoo upon her office table.

The exchange answered, demanding her number, then told her crisply: "Ipswich wants you," and a moment later the parson was speaking.

There was a placating geniality about his voice which brought a swift alertness to Bill's hard eyes. Something had happened, or Max would not use the telephone, she knew.

"Oh, Mrs. Coke," he began, as though they were comparative strangers. "I shan't be able to send over for that table to-night. But my man will come early in the morning."

"Where are you speaking from?" she put in sharply.

"Er—Eckenhams," he answered with a suspicion of hesitancy. "I had to come over here. I'm going straight back now. It'll be all right;" he was dropping into a more intimate tone. "As a matter of fact, the car's developed trouble; that's what I came here for."

Bill's face had grown white.

"And you'll come over yourself to-morrow?" she questioned.

"Yes. Yes. In the morning. To settle up—er—for the table." A little distorted laugh came over the wire, then his voice lowered. "It's quite all right. It's more convenient. I'll explain to-morrow." The line went dumb, but Bill sat with the receiver to her ear, still as a statue, but for that nervous drumming of the fingers and an occasional moistening of the dry lips.

It was the telephone operator who woke her from her coma with a sharp: "Number, please."

Bill faltered.

"Er—er——" she began, then with swift decision: "I want the Blue Boar. I don't know its number. Could you get me through?" and a minute later she was saying: "Mr. Culver, please come to The Pines at once. I must see you. I must. You will come, won't you? Promise me. It's something extremely important. You will, please say you will?"

II

Culver's promise brought a sigh of relief from those dry, tight-drawn lips. She rose from the desk and went to a little, dark-green safe set in the wall by its side. It had a combination lock, and Bill deftly manœuvred the numbers until it swung open.

There was a pile of notes in one of the metal drawers, and she took the lot, cramming them carelessly into the pocket of her overall; then she went hurriedly through a batch of papers, picked out a passport and a letter enclosed in a buff business envelope, slammed the safe to, and went on to her bedroom.

Bill's toilet was swift and effective. She packed a handy suitcase with a few necessary things, changed into an inconspicuous coat and skirt, took a fur coat and a raincoat from her wardrobe, then went back to her office and scribbled a note to her maid.

It was an ingenuous letter, and very plausible. Bill wrote that she had heard by telephone that her sister in London was dying—"motor smash," she put in between dashes—and she had gone straight off. Would the maid explain this to any customers, and Bill hoped, she said, to be back in a couple of days. Anyhow, she would telephone in the morning.

She added as an afterthought: "The Reverend Clement Foster of Bidely will be sending over for the table to-morrow. It's all ready for him."

Bill was perfectly calm now. She had made her decision. The thing which she feared for years had come, but it did not find her unprepared.

Her plans had been long and carefully thought out, often through weary hours of the night when the horror had loomed so much larger than it did in the

daylight. True the crash had come at a most awkward moment, and almost without warning. But if she could only get abroad safely, with what she took with her and the nest-egg, patiently amassed in another name at the Credit Lyonnais in Paris, she ought to be fairly safe for a bit.

And then she would get even with Max Schiller. Bill Coke's hatred was of the cold, passionless type, and she had hated Schiller for years. But he had been useful to her; had brought her satisfying profits, and though that allayed the desire for revenge, it in no way killed it.

And now Max had bolted—she had no doubt of that—bolted and left her to shift for herself. They always said of him that he was a coward, more careful of his own skin than of anything else. And he had always saved that skin, and had been cunning enough not to incriminate himself. You never knew what Max was thinking, or what he would do. In fact, Bill reflected savagely, even she knew very little at all about Max Schiller, save that he was the elusive "A Friend." But she would find him, and the next time he should be left to bear the brunt.

Bill thought of the stormy, uncertain life ahead of her, and wisely refused, then, to face its gaunt possibilities. There was much too much to be tackled immediately to waste time in surmise of to-morrow. There might not even be a to-morrow, in one sense. Bill had trained herself well to keep the future in its proper place. It was not often that she failed herself as badly as she had to-night.

She was lurking by the door when the ring came, and there was one ghastly, terrifying moment as she went forward; a moment of cold fear. Supposing this should be "them," instead of the simple, sentimental

Culver, the shadowy, ever-dreaded Nemesis? She flung open the door defiantly.

A gust of raw wind swept in and set the hall lamp swinging, and, unbidden, Dick Culver stepped out of the harsh night. He blinked in the stronger light and stared at Mrs. Coke awkwardly.

"How awfully sweet of you!" she said, closing the door. She had forced all her old charm of manner to her aid, yet into it she insinuated a certain reticence and suggestion of personal sorrow.

"You wanted to see me," he answered in a monotone, more nervous and uncertain than hers.

"I did indeed," she went on, growing graver. "I'd no right to bother you, I know, but I've had some bad news, and—I don't know—I somehow felt that you—of all people—would be kindest. My sister is dying, and—I—I've got to go up to Town at once. I only heard on the telephone just now—and I rang you immediately. You see, the last train's gone, and I—I wondered if you'd be so awfully kind as to take me up. I know it's a lot to ask, but really—it—it means so much to me, we—we were very close to one another. And even now it may be too late. But——"

Bill broke down quietly and sedately. She did not cry; she looked as if she longed to do so, but could not. She smiled bravely and added: "But of course, I mustn't ask you. I can hire a car. It was only that I remembered how fast yours was. One does get rather upset."

She had led him into the dining-room, and stood looking at him in embarrassed appeal.

Culver was not prepared for this. He had quickly regretted his promise to come to her, and on his way to The Pines had racked his brain to imagine what possible covert reason Mrs. Coke might have for summoning him so urgently. It would have to do with

that "something" which had gone wrong, he felt sure, and he had thought, with some satisfaction, that he might, to the end, play an important part in the plans of Ann and her associates.

But now, faced by this agitated, white-faced woman, with her convincingly told story, he felt at a loss. She had managed to appeal to his sympathy, though he was by no means satisfied; there was uncertainty in his mind as to whether her story were false. She looked so much distressed.

Bill gave a pathetic little gasp and put her thin white hands over her eyes.

"It was a motor smash—this evening," she went on as if talking to herself. "Poor Gladys! My only sister. . . ."

Mrs. Coke was too anxious. She had assessed Dick Culver as an honest sentimentalist, and there she was right; but of his knowledge of herself she had not the least inkling. And she overdid it.

Her "Poor Gladys! My only sister . . ." outraged Culver's common sense. He knew too much about Bill Coke, and he had known Jean and Adelaide Cupper. A wavering sympathy turned to indignation.

"Mrs. Coke, how much of this story is true?" he asked suddenly.

Bill's head jerked up in fright.

She was quick, but not quick enough. She still bluffed on, but he had seen the guilt in her eyes before she was able to avert them and force the tone of timid reproach in which she answered:

"True? Oh, I wish it weren't. What do you mean, Mr. Culver?"

Culver was sickened, and horribly unhappy. He wanted to get out of this. Bill Coke was repulsive to him then, but the prospect of being concerned in her arrest was even more distasteful. He found it an

effort to answer her, and he turned sharply towards the door.

"I'm afraid I don't believe you," he said harshly. "I don't want to argue, and I think it would be much better if I went. You understand me, Mrs. Coke—perfectly well."

Then Bill did understand, and the revelation came to her like a stunning blow. He saw her blunder, and she saw her immediate danger. A dreadful, haunting, vacant grin came to her red lips. It made her face look like some grotesque Oriental mask, Culver thought, a mask of evil steeped in reckless despair.

"So you were one of them, after all?" she said in a voice utterly devoid of expression.

"I don't understand quite what you mean by 'one of them,'" he answered hastily. "But I know: and I don't want to take any action—any active part at all in—in anything that may happen. I'm not one of them in that sense."

She stared straight at him for an instant, and he felt that her cold eyes were literally reading his thoughts. Then:

"But you're too much of a coward to want to hear the truth," she said scornfully. "I know the sort of man you are. You shut your eyes to unpleasant things and pretend they don't exist, eh? It isn't quite nice to hound a woman into gaol, but you'll be just as glad when she's there."

He flushed.

"I tell you I don't want to go into it at all," he protested weakly.

"I said you wouldn't," she retorted. "You won't even be just; you won't even listen. You'd damn me, willingly, unheard." Her voice broke suddenly. "Why do you think Jean sent you to me?" she added with emotion.

Jean's name broke down Culver's resolution. His desire to solve the riddle of Jean was stronger than he realised.

"Why?" he asked, trapped by the subtlety of her question.

"To help me out of—of the—ghastly position—I'm in—now," she said slowly.

"Why should I believe that?"

Bill had caught him again, caught him with a last despairing effort.

"If you're not afraid to listen, I'll tell you," she said. "You've surely nothing to be nervous about, Mr. Culver. They don't want you; and anything I tell you, you can run back with to them as evidence against me—if you think it is."

III

Unconsciously he dropped into a chair, his eyes fixed on her white face, fascinated yet unwilling.

Bill began to crack under the strain. She was not quite sure of her man, nor of the best method of holding him. And if she failed now, she knew that everything was lost. She was thinking feverishly. Cheap sentiment would not do. Shameless confession might—only an appeal to his chivalry she felt would move him.

"Jean was my husband," she said suddenly in an attempt at complete surprise.

"I knew it," he answered, and she gasped.

"His real name was——"

"Clement Foster. I know his story and yours pretty well, to the time you left Wandle End, that is. Who's your confederate who has been using his name—at Bidely? Is he Friend?"

To Bill's panic-possessed brain Culver's frank question brought a curious satisfaction. If he—they

—guessed that Max Schiller was Friend, then there was a chance of his being caught this time. That would make up for much—for everything, if only she could escape.

She nodded defiantly.

“You’re right. Max Schiller’s his other name. He’s the devil who brought me to this, and the damned swine has bolted. I hope your lot have got him. If only he gets what he deserves . . .”

Her iron nerves seemed to snap, and she staked everything upon the chance of gaining Culver’s sympathy. It might be done, even now.

Her words came in an unrestrained torrent. To Culver it did not seem possible that it was the correct, self-possessed Mrs. Coke who was speaking. Her steel-blue eyes were large with terror, her face seemed to shrivel to some dead-white, skull-like thing in which two red lips moved ceaselessly. And her story was frank to the point of brutality.

“I’m not making excuses for myself,” she said savagely. “I wanted that necklace of old mother Cape’s, and I got it, got it away in Clem’s pocket.” The familiarity of the name sounded fantastic to Culver. “I couldn’t help it. I had to have money; we were degradingly poor, and the Capes were rolling in it. It wouldn’t have hurt them; the pearls were insured. And money to me is like—like drink or drugs to some people. I’ve got to have it. It’s a disease. And I was going to leave Clem that night, anyhow. I was mad ever to have married him. But he thought he could cure me. Oh, he knew, poor devil! He knew all along.”

“And what happened to him?” Culver broke in.

“He—I don’t know. I heard he went to sea as a common sailor. I didn’t know that for years afterwards. It was Max who told me, curse him! Max found Clem somewhere in France. Clem had sunk

pretty low then; he'd been in prison, and was always drunk, so Max said. And that devil got his story out of him—about what he'd been, and me. You don't know the slimy beast that he is. Max wormed it all out, every bit of it, and then turned on both of us. That's his way—that's how he gets people to do his dirty work for him and save his rotten skin. Oh, Max Schiller doesn't take many chances."

Again Culver checked her. Her shameless candour was infecting him. It killed, for the moment, his natural susceptibilities.

"What do you mean, exactly? It's no good putting all the blame on Friend," he said brusquely.

"I'll tell you what I mean," Bill answered in a low voice, cruel with anger. "I'd married again then—married Wilfred——"

"Married?" Culver queried, hardly knowing that he spoke.

"You needn't sneer," she snapped at him. "'Went through the form of marriage,' if you want to be a policeman. I'd heard nothing of Clem for four years. And I thought I had a chance. Wilfred Coke was rich in those days. But when that devil Max heard about me from Clem, he found me. He would. It took him five years to do it, but he found me. Came to a little antique shop I'd started, as a customer. Oh, he became quite a friend before I knew what he was after." Bill's voice was inexpressibly bitter. "Then he started. I was to sell things for him, things that would be left at the shop quietly with no questions asked on either side. And when I objected he put on the screw."

Culver was listening in rapt amazement to this tale of villainy. Bill elaborated it with all the graphic intensity born of years of hatred. Subconsciously she was getting little touches of the sham parson's oily voice into her narrative as she told how he argued

blandly that she must do what he asked, otherwise the police might object.

That was when he produced the proofs of her bigamous marriage, irrefutable proofs of Clement Foster's existence in Belgium then. Bill said in a tone steeped in venom and a yearning for vengeance :

"I can hear him now. The brute was almost crying when he whined: 'And if we brought your poor husband over here, think what a scandal it would cause. Not only you would suffer, Mrs. Coke.' God! I could kill that man. But he had me. What could I do? It was better to go his way and chance it than make sure of it the other way."

She stressed the "it" in an odd, definite fashion which left no doubt as to the meaning of the word. "It" had meant this moment, or what might immediately follow it, to Bill Coke for years past.

Her tale was so unvarnished, so naked in its crude truthfulness, that Culver did not doubt it. It was shameful bravado, perhaps, but convincing. No woman, not even so evil a woman as she, could have made up the story. Yet Culver wanted more proof.

"What has this to do with Jean's letter—your husband's letter?" he asked searchingly.

Bill opened her bag.

"Read it," she said.

IV

She handed him an ordinary buff-coloured business envelope. It looked as if it might contain some trivial circular. Her hand was quite steady, but her wild eyes were on his face as he took it, and she saw the eagerness there, and was glad.

She sat back and sighed, then her control broke again for the moment.

"Oh, God! I must smoke. Give me a cigarette.

Gaspar—anything. I can't drink; I wish I could. It must be helpful—sometimes."

Culver stopped mechanically, the envelope half opened, and pulled his case from his pocket. He left her to help herself and light the cigarette, for his mind was back in St. Gules on that August day when he had groped beneath Jean's pillow with the dying man gasping so painfully, "You will promise me," and he answering glibly: "Yes, yes. I will."

And now, he believed, he was to know what it was that he had promised.

Bill struck a match and drew in a great puff of smoke with intense relief. Culver pulled the letter from its envelope and stooped down to pick up a cutting which fell from it to the floor. Instinctively he glanced at it first.

It was torn roughly from one of the London illustrated weeklies—a portrait of Bill with caption beneath: "Mrs. Wilfred Coke, widow of the well-known etcher, who has just opened an antique shop in Oldford under the name of 'William Cook.' Mrs. Coke is a great authority upon *objets d'art*."

That seemed meaningless, since he knew the purport so well, and he turned to the letter—six pages of it, neatly written in the small handwriting of the educated Englishman.

"Maudie," it began. Again he was struck by the intimacy, the homeliness of the pet name in the midst of this sordid tragedy. Maudie and Clem! They belonged, surely, to a cleaner world than this in which he now lived. Maudie was the proud, old-fashioned girl of that tennis snapshot; Clem the prim parson whose memory had been treasured in Adelaide Cupper's heart for so long. They were not Bill and Jean. Yet they were.

Culver read on eagerly. The letter was disconnected and filled with allusions which he could not

understand. But its meaning was definitely clear. Jean wrote under the influence of a tremendous shock. That cutting which he enclosed had told him for the first time the identity of "William Cook," the man, as he had supposed, with whom he had been instructed to communicate by his employer, Max Schiller.

In this letter, Culver realised, was the source of much of Bill's information concerning Clement Foster's later life. He admitted openly the depths to which he had sunk, and told how Schiller had got him in his power. For years Jean had been a humble link in the chain of Max Schiller's organisation for the furtive distribution of stolen property.

Culver could appreciate the devilish cunning of the scheme—how easy it was for people of every class to communicate with a café waiter, how useful such a man could be to a pitiless, callous brute like Schiller.

But the bitterest note in the whole of this pathetic document came towards the end. Jean wrote: "But this crowning outrage has given me back some of my manhood, thank God. I will not believe that you know the evil of this man Schiller; I will not believe that you are a party to his actions. Maybe he has got hold of you, too, poor girl. This news, of who William Cook is, came to me like some terrible act of divine retribution. But it is cleansing. . . ."

Jean wandered for a while, with Scriptural allusion. The whole letter was clearly that of a man unbalanced. But he came back to his point with a very lucid statement.

He wrote, he said, to give Maude warning to save herself, and he vowed that, at whatever cost to himself, he would expose Max Schiller.

"The man is an abomination," he said; then the letter broke off.

It was taken up, obviously, later, in a more shaky

hand. Jean had been ill; he spoke of a heart attack, and there was little fire, only resignation in the concluding part. He pleaded pathetically with Bill to get free of Schiller.

"It seems that I am not to carry out my desire," he said. "Maudie, I know now that I have not long to live—perhaps a few hours only. A doctor came to-day and I guessed. He was sent by an Englishman—the only man from whom I have received real Christian charity for so many years. He visited the sick, and relieved the poor. Culver is his name. I am going to tell him the whole story—God giving me strength—and make him promise to do what I would have done. He shall tell you——"

The words were hardly legible now; Culver could discern with difficulty: "Save you from the final disgrace," then a rambling appeal in which for the first time there were traces of affection: little pet names that made him uneasy to read. Jean's mind had clearly passed from control, and wandered back through the years.

He finished: "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive yours——" The rest was an unintelligible scrawl, and a great blur when the pen had dropped from his shaking hand.

That was all. Yet in those fevered lines Culver had read the story of old Jean's wasted, ruined life. It gave the key to his last words. Death had raised this poor devil from the utter depths. He had gone out Clement Foster, not Jean Malet, and as Clement Foster had pleaded almost to the last, with the stranger, whom he trusted, to help him in his final, dominating longing to save a worthless woman whom he still loved.

Culver folded up the crumpled paper reverently. It was thin, cheap-looking, foreign stuff, so unlike the essentially English writing upon it. As unlike as Jean the waiter was to Foster the curate.

He looked at the woman wonderingly. Her eyes were half closed, and she appeared unconscious of his gaze, although he was certain that, under those drooping lids, she was watching him. Culver's feelings were curiously impersonal. Poor old Jean seemed real enough—his tragedy he could understand. But Bill was unreal, Bill sitting a couple of yards away with her cigarette smoking away to ash between her long fingers. Her breath was coming in short, hard gasps as though she panted from some violent exercise. She didn't look evil—only tired and old and very anxious. And yet her life must have contained—how many?—unbelievably ugly chapters.

And poor old Jean had still thought it worth while to try to save her! Culver found himself thinking, in a detached way, what might have happened if he had heard Jean's story—if he had never met Phil Norman that afternoon in St. Gules and had gone again to see Jean a day sooner, as he had promised.

Would it have made any difference to Bill? Suppose he had come to her having heard all, and more than, he knew now, from Jean's own lips; would that have influenced her? Or would he ever have undertaken the mission?

Bill could not stand that inscrutable stare. She could read neither sympathy nor hostility in it.

"Oh, God! What are you going to do?" she cried, with sudden passion. "Don't look at me like that. You see what he wanted—Clem, my husband. He knew I was in that devil's power and he was going to get me out of it. He says he was going to make you promise to do it. And instead you've done nothing—just gone on trapping me. I thought at first he couldn't have told you. You said nothing about it. How cruel of you, to know all the time—and never tell me—and——"

"I didn't know," he broke in defensively. "He—

he tried to tell me something, but he could not. It was too late. He made me understand I was to bring the letter. That's what I thought he made me promise."

Bill started up from her seat.

"But now you know—now you know what he really meant—you will—won't you? Oh, Mr. Culver, if I hadn't been so terrified, if I hadn't shown you that false letter, I would have stopped, really I would. I swear I didn't know who Jean was until that letter came. I'd never seen him, never, over there. Elsa knew him. And that devil Max. I hated Max even more when he started to use Clem's name. He said it was safe, and he used to jeer at me about it. You don't know—can't know what that man has done. His cruelty——"

"And what do you want me to do, Mrs. Coke?" Culver asked abruptly.

He was beyond normal reasoning now. Bill Coke's frenzied appeal made less impression upon him than his memory of Jean, and the feeling that perhaps something of this tragic confusion might have been avoided had he seen the old man, if only an hour or two, before he did. In the tenseness of the strain Culver blamed himself illogically.

Bill Coke's answer came hard and definite:

"Give me the chance he wanted to give me. You can do it. I can't get a train, I daren't hire a car. With Max gone like he has, it means things are pretty bad. And I've had a warning, too. I only want a chance—unless you are one of them. If so"—she shrugged her shoulders—"well, go on. I've given myself away to you."

She saw him frown, almost in pain.

"Suppose I was Ann," she went on. "You wouldn't hesitate then, would you? Oh, I could see how you'd fallen for her. But I'll tell you this; Ann might have been in my position some time; Max had

his eye on her; she's just the wild, reckless sort of girl to get herself into trouble, and Max would have seen that she did. Very useful, he said she might be; but I swear to God I headed him off half a dozen times. I tried to keep her away from him."

Despite the satirical humour of the situation, Culver believed that part of Bill's story, and it brought just a glimmer of sympathy with it, and a queer, unsuspected distaste for Ann's part in this business. The thought was worrying, and he put it from him.

"Where do you want to get to?" he asked suddenly.

"North," she whispered, and her eyes opened wider in mingled relief and hope. "North, if you would. It's safer. Get me to Norwich—it's a big city. I'll look after myself there. You could do it in an hour. I'll go abroad, I'll never come back again, I swear."

Culver sighed as he pulled himself to his feet. He was being a fool, he knew, but somehow he wanted this woman to get away. It might do some good. And poor old Jean had wanted it. Perhaps, even more than that, there was dominating his mind that formless aversion to betraying—that was how he saw it—a woman he had known, no matter how evil he knew her to be. He wanted to have no part in that, and he wanted to keep from Bill Coke the knowledge of Ann's part in her exposure.

He spoke unnaturally, almost roughly.

"All right, I'll try," he said. "I've no right to, but—Look here, I oughtn't to come back. Is there anywhere I can pick you up?"

She nodded; she was almost beyond speech at that moment.

"I'll come with you now and show you," she murmured. "I'll wait there. We can get through the garden."

CHAPTER XXV

I

MAX SCHILLER, *alias* Clement Foster, had received his warning, and a far more definite one, when he returned to the rectory after a most excellent lunch with Franklin Parry.

He had sat long over that meal, and he was feeling thoroughly contented : good food always had a soothing effect on him, and the end of his task was in sight. That was a comforting contemplation, too. He would get away early in the morning, drive to Town, and catch the two o'clock to Paris. Just as well to get clean away until Bill had cleared up the whole affair.

Schiller hired a cab to drive him back to Bidely. It had turned cold and misty, and there was a lot to do at the other end. They must get the glass down from the tower chest as soon as it was dark. It could be run over to The Pines in half an hour, then there would be nothing to worry about ; he might even get up to Town that evening if he wanted to. Ellis could arrange things at the rectory. He would have to stay on for a week or two before he left—certainly till old Britain came back. And once the glass was away, Ellis was safe enough—a regular church servant. And besides, nobody would ever know about those windows in a heaven-forgotten, little hole like Bidely. They didn't have a score of visitors there in a whole year.

He cast his mind back to Franklin Parry. That was an odd thing Bill had told about him. Owned Carey Manor now, did he ; and its treasures ? Not all of them perhaps ; Max Schiller grinned to himself at the

thought. There was nothing to worry about over Parry; he had satisfied himself of that at lunch.

The cab slowed as it lurched up the sandy lane towards the rectory, and the "Rev. Clement Foster" smiled benignly at a couple of Amos Gill's men tramping homeward from their work: the men touched their hats respectfully.

But that was when the parson's peace of mind ceased. Ellis was at the rectory gate, and Schiller saw from his companion's face, as he paid the cab-driver, that something was wrong.

Ellis produced a telegram the moment they were safely in the house, an innocent-looking message addressed to the Rev. W. Britain, rather long, and dealing, apparently, with some matters in connection with the roof repairs. Ellis had already decoded it, and Schiller's expression lost all of its benignity as he learnt its purport. But he professed indifference.

"Well, what about it?" he said truculently, "I don't see how that affects us. What if they have got Elsa?—she's not working for me, that's Bill's business."

"Oh no, of course not," Ellis retorted sharply, "but they'll have Bill next, and she'll keep her mouth shut, won't she? You aren't loved as much as all that, Max. Hollar says at the end of the message: 'Confirm order at once,' and you know what that means. It means clear out quick, and I tell you I'm going to. You can do what you like."

"Don't be a fool, Marty," Max snapped. He realised exactly the urgency of his agent, Hollar's, message, but Schiller's brain was far keener than that of Ellis'. He knew he must get away quickly, but Ellis was clearly panic-stricken, and must be looked after, or there might be trouble.

Ellis broke in savagely: "I'm not the fool. I can

tell you something else. There's been someone messing about here to-day; I damned nearly caught him in the shrubs this afternoon."

"Rot! One of the workmen," Schiller answered, affecting the same indifference.

"Oh, was it?" Ellis sneered. "I know better. Then what have you got to say to this? There are marks in the tower, not ours. On the ladder and the floor above—where the bells are. The dust is an inch deep up there, except where one of your 'workmen' have been. And you know they're not allowed up there."

"When did you find that out?" Schiller asked. He looked really worried now, and no longer affected the sceptical manner.

Ellis explained volubly. He was thoroughly frightened, and so was the parson before he had finished. He was convinced that Ellis' man in the shrubbery had been real, and immediately his lifelong instinct for self-preservation possessed him.

Schiller thought quickly. Ellis' suggestion to give Bill the tip, he brushed aside; Max Schiller knew police methods. If they suspected her, he would have a much better chance for his own skin if she remained behind to occupy their attention. The very fact of her ignorance might delay police action, and if she started to bolt it would be certain to be known, and start an alarm.

"All right, Marty," he said at last. "I'll go at once."

"We'll go, you mean," Ellis put in.

"You'll be a fool if you do. You're quite safe—who'd suspect you? You're asking for trouble—they'll know at once, if you run, that you're in it."

"And they're welcome to," Ellis said. "You don't get me staying behind to cover your tracks, Max. I never did like this job, and I said so. I'm leaving in

the car inside half an hour, and if you like to come you can; if not, you can do what you like."

"Very well, Marty, I'll be ready," the parson agreed, with unusual submission.

II

Ellis dropped the parson near the trolley bus terminus on the outskirts of Ipswich. Ellis was for pushing straight on to Harwich and abandoning the car there in a garage, but Schiller disagreed. He would pick up the boat train from the North at Ipswich; it was safer that way, he said. So they parted, and Schiller was not sorry to be rid of Ellis; in a crisis of this kind, he preferred to work alone.

"The Rev. Clement Foster" had discarded his clerical attire. That, in a neat parcel deftly weighted with a brick, went into a road-side pond half a mile the Bidely side of the London main road, and when he alighted from the bus in the main street of Ipswich, he had something of the appearance of a well-to-do farmer in an old rain-coat, well soaked by the evening downpour, and a dripping, soft felt hat pulled down over his eyes as protection from the weather.

He telephoned to Bill from the post-office, then sought the shelter of a quiet inn for a snack of food while he killed the time before the train was due. He was very nervy now, and filled with a growing, sullen anger. This was the second failure he had had, and money was getting more than a little tight. Very bitterly he regretted those two hundred pounds he had paid over to Bill that afternoon.

Supposing this were a false alarm after all, he pondered; supposing they weren't on to Bill! What was going to happen then? She had half the stuff hidden away at The Pines, and when she tumbled to what he had done, she'd get rid of it for herself.

He began to regret that he had not told a more plausible tale to her. He could have faked up some yarn to account for his sudden flight, and yet kept a hold on her. It was all Marty's fault, damn him! That came of not working alone. He ought to have done the job himself, or left Marty to do it. Something always got out if you had a lot of people together on a job.

Max Schiller watched the clock, and thought he had never known it move so slowly. But he was too experienced in these matters to hurry rashly. Max knew the dangers of loafing about railway platforms, where each waiting traveller stared at, and took an idle interest in, the other. The thing to do was to arrive just as the train came in, and in the immediate bustle of alighting and embarking passengers to slip quietly into a well-filled compartment. That was how one attracted least attention.

And that was what he did. He passed the ticket-collector with the boat train actually steaming into the station. He took the vacated place of a weary commercial traveller in a third-class smoker almost before the six other occupants knew their companion had gone. Then he buried himself in an evening paper and read stolidly.

People wandered up and down the corridor, glanced into his compartment, and, noticing it amply filled, passed on. Max just raised his eyes to nod, "Boat" to an officious inspector who put his head through the open door inquiring mechanically, "Where for, please?" but he breathed a deal more easily when at last the train started.

For the first time he looked about him. His companions were dozing stupidly, drugged by the heavy air of the carriage. An excited foreigner in the corridor was chatting in voluble French to an unseen

acquaintance. Max spoke French well, and it amused him to listen to this young man's lamentations. He was uneasy about his luggage, and certain that it was not on the train. The unseen companion deplored the stupidity of the British railway system, and the barbarity of its servants. Max felt confident, and the lifeless air lulled him, too, to a restless sleep.

He woke to his full senses to find the train at a stop, and his fellow-travellers groping for their luggage from the rack. Porters were shouting outside the door, and the fresh, keen scent of the sea cut into the stale air of the train.

The foreigner was still excited. He appealed helplessly to the world to tell him where his luggage was. Max answered instinctively that it would be all right.

"But, m'sieur, what is it that one does?" the despairing young man demanded.

Schiller grinned, and announced that one did nothing. One left it to the porters.

The train was emptying, and the foreigner bade him, in despair, to reassure his friend. Max went into the deserted corridor.

"Your luggage will be on the boat——" he began, talking in fluent French.

The friend, a pallid, ineffectual looking man with a stupid lock of fair hair straying over his moist forehead, nodded briskly and came close to him. The excited foreigner closed on the other side. Schiller swung round in swift alarm.

"It's all right, Mr. Foster," a reminiscent voice said, the voice of that simple curate who had been dilating, earlier in the day, upon the beauties of stained glass. "No need for a fuss unless you make it. But I want to talk to you for a few minutes. And, is Martingale on the train?"

Schiller glared impatiently. "Go to hell," he said.

"What's the game? I can't waste time talking to you." He made an attempt to shoulder his way back into the compartment.

But the mild young man laid a restraining hand on him that was by no means gentle.

"If you want trouble you can have it—Friend," he threatened. "You're going to waste a lot of time talking to me. All right"—he nodded to the other man—"I'll look after him, Harris. Have a run through the boat and see who else is here."

Harris seemed reluctant to leave. He gazed at Max more with admiring interest than hostility. Then: "Sorry, old chap, but I've been wanting to meet you for three years," he said in a perfectly friendly voice. "Now, don't be silly, it's not going to do any good. We don't want to make trouble. I'll be back in a minute."

He seemed to evaporate through the adjoining door, and the man who had been the mild young curate took a gently firm hold on Max Schiller's cuff.

"That's right," he urged. "Take it like a man; your luck's out this time, that's all." With trained fingers he ran over Schiller's pockets. "If you've got a gun," he went on confidentially, "give it up quietly. It'll help, you know."

Max Schiller's face distorted in mad rage. He started to frame some dreadful outburst of fury, but the spirit seemed to leave him suddenly, and he crumpled.

"All right, but tell me who squeaked?" he asked with incongruous composure.

"The Reverend Clement Foster, as far as I understand," the detective answered with an enigmatic smile.

CHAPTER XXVI

I

BILL COKE led Culver by a back door out through the driving rain, across the tennis lawn and kitchen garden beyond, and by a gap in the hedge to the open fields.

She moved swiftly, as one who knew the path well, and he stumbled after her carrying her suitcase. He left her in the shelter of a hedge nearly a quarter of a mile from the house and close by a fork in the lane, one arm of which led on to Bidely village, and the other up the hill to the London main road.

He hurried back to the town to get the car, with a tragic image in his mind of Bill, as he had left her, a fugitive, crouching in the night rain, huddled in her fur coat and whispering to him hoarsely, "Hurry, for God's sake, hurry," and then with pitiful inconsequence, "It's so wet. I shall ruin my coat."

Culver felt reckless. He was going through with this task, right or wrong. The ethics of it did not concern him then; the revelations Bill had made had shocked his sense of proportion far out of the true. It was all so ghastly, this hunting down of human beings. It had to be done, of course, but he wanted to take no share in it, and that distaste of Ann Gray's share in this affair had grown materially.

Only once, and that as he bent over the engine in the garage had he any question of his responsibility in the matter. Was he not about to make himself an accessory to Bill's crimes? He slammed down the bonnet viciously, and climbed into his seat. Time to think about that later. At least, he realised with curious surprise, this was a more sympathetic job than Parry's, if grossly unmoral.

Culver let the car run quietly down the hill to the fork roads. He was excited now, and apprehensive. From the darkness where The Pines lay hidden in its trees, there came the angry baying of a dog. Dirk, perhaps, discovering himself deserted; dogs had an uncanny sense of these things. Or—— The next thought made his heart beat quicker. Had “they” got to the house at last, and too late?

Mrs. Coke rose out of the blackness of the hedge almost before he realised where he was. His faint sidelights showed up her frantic face. He could see her lips moving, though he could hear no word she said. But she confirmed his fears as he jumped from his seat to help her into the car.

“They’re there, they’re there,” she said in cold fright. “They came about five minutes ago—I heard Dirk. I thought you’d never come. Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.”

She sank, almost lifeless, into the back seat, a dark, wet, quivering bundle of terror, and Culver started, nursing the car back up the hill, then letting her out on the tarred main road and taking chances he never would have considered possible in his sane moments.

All his attention was needed for driving, and he almost forgot Bill’s existence. She made no attempt to communicate with him. Once, as they passed through some market town, he glanced backwards and saw her, by the street lights, sunk in the same inert mass, crouching, as it seemed, to escape the notice of hostile eyes.

As they neared Norwich he felt he must rouse her, and he slowed for a moment and called to her over his shoulder.

She answered quickly enough, “All right, I shall be all right when we get there. Go to the station; I’ll take a cab there. It would be less conspicuous.”

And in the semi-darkness of the station yard he left her. She was magnificent at the end—the old, self-confident Bill Coke, laughing at her bedraggled state, and thanking him with just the correct, casual politeness of one who has received an ordinary courtesy. An evening train had just arrived, and in the normal hustle of the yard there was nothing to attract attention.

Culver admired her nerve; he could not help it, and he was grateful to her for avoiding extravagant gratitude. He did not want to be thanked, and Bill appeared to know it.

“Good-bye,” she said at the last, “I’ll write to you when my plans are settled. And thanks so much.” She waved a hand.

The cab drove off, and Culver climbed back into his car, and set the Fowler’s head for Oldford again.

II

The journey back he took more slowly. He found himself suddenly very exhausted. Thoughts muddled themselves as they crowded his mind, and he began to wonder what excuse he could put up to Parry for the state of the car, if he should see it. Better tell him the truth and be damned to the consequences, he supposed. After all he wasn’t a policeman, and old Jean’s memory mattered a deal more to him than Max Schiller—Harris’ obsession—Friend.

He’d say he’d driven Bill to Norwich—she’d be away in the morning. They’d probably catch her some time; if not for this, for some other crooked business, he reflected bitterly. Only he hoped he would never hear of it.

Culver did not inquire for Parry when he reached the Blue Boar. He went straight to his room and to bed, and tried to sleep. But that was not an easy task.

Hour after hour he lay awake, listening to the wind and the rain slashing at the window, while his mind ranged fitfully over the events of the whole mad drama of the past weeks. Surely that was ended now. This wretched gang was broken up. Of course there'd be a screaming sensation about it, but he hoped to heaven he could keep out of it. And that Ann would be out of it, too. They wouldn't drag her name into the story. That would be beastly.

He fell to wondering if he would ever see Ann again. She said she was going to her cousin's. Perhaps Parry would know where he could find her. Unless Parry turned up rusty—couldn't blame him if he did. Culver turned in his bed for the twentieth time. Lord! what a rotten life it all was! He thought with envy of the peaceful man who used to be Dick Culver; who had thought, by now, to be idling lazily in Spain.

Sleep came towards dawn; an uneasy dream-ridden sleep, with Ann and Bill oddly mixed up, and the pale-faced Harris, dressed as a parson, in the slum shop in Antwerp, which blended, in dream-fashion, into the vestry of St. Crispin's, with Miss Cupper fussing with her flowers, and Parry making an interminable speech.

That part, at least, had some real basis, for Culver opened his eyes, stupidly, to find Parry by his bedside. Culver jerked himself up on his elbows in a sudden, subconscious alarm, but Parry smiled in his wooden way and said:

"Sorry not to turn up last night, old man, but we had rather a hectic time. Someone flushed the cover, and the birds got up too soon."

"What? What's that?" Culver asked, trying to collect his sleepy wits.

"Our pals—hopped it," Parry explained laconi-

cally. "Packed up their little tents and silently stole away. But we've got most of them."

Culver forced himself to appear surprised.

"You've got them?" he said, blinking.

"All but the fair Bill; she was just a little bit too quick for us. They'll probably get her yet, but when the local bobbies went to The Pines, all they found was your old friend the dog. From what I hear, that dog had two of Suffolk's smartest tecs chasing round the garden for their lives. No fool, Bill Coke." He grinned appreciatively.

"But what about the rest?" Culver asked, genuinely interested.

"The parson and Ellis they nabbed at Harwich, trying to make the night boat. Our Mr. Harris is walking on air to-day; the amiable parson is his pal Friend. Mr. Harris will tell you all about it when you see him. He's like a cat with two tails."

"And Ellis, too, you say?"

"Yes, he's landed. And sweet Marie—the charming Elsa. She's got a pretty murky record, old man. They got her in Paris. That's what started the rout. But the gallant captain, he's loose, and Bill. I'm sorry about Bill, I'd rather concentrated on her; I'd hoped to get on the track of some of my stuff. But there you are, I can't say I'll cry now the job's over. It isn't half the fun you'd think."

Franklin Parry proceeded to seek solace in his inevitable pipe, and Culver crawled stiffly from the bed.

"Oh, well! I'm glad it's all over," he said. "It's out of my line of country."

Parry nodded agreement.

"Well, it'll soon be finished," he said. "I don't think you'll see much of me to-day, though. You'll find me at The Pines this morning, if you want me."

They're going through the place with a fine tooth-comb. We started last night, but Bill was cute. We hadn't found a single incriminating thing up to about one o'clock this morning. I wonder she left. She could have stopped and bluffed it out, I believe."

Culver was stropping a razor.

"It's too much for me," he said, non-committally, and Parry went to the door.

"I'll try and be back for lunch," he said, "but if you like to come along and see what's doing—come." He hesitated for a moment. "You'll find Harris and Ann there," he added casually.

III

At first, Dick Culver vowed to himself that nothing should drag him to The Pines that morning. He was not going back into the sordid atmosphere he hoped to have escaped for ever. And he did not want to see Ann—there.

But human curiosity conquered aversion. It was a nerve-fretting job sitting about in the almost empty hotel, with nothing to do, and nothing to distract his thoughts. He couldn't shift them from The Pines, and ceaseless speculation of what was happening there.

Soon after eleven he surrendered with ill grace, and tramped through the rain towards the river.

Ann's car stood in the drive of The Pines. A uniformed policeman let him into the house. That was grim to start with. Somehow, he had not expected to see the law openly in charge of Bill's home.

The constable nodded in an intimate way.

"Mr. Parry said you'd be coming," he said. "He's in the studio; you know the way?"

"I know it," Culver answered with a sigh, and he found himself wondering where Bill Coke was at that moment; Bill, that evil, unhappy woman, who would never again enter her attractive home.

The studio was in ordered chaos. It looked as if preparations for a sale were in progress. Two policemen, one in plain clothes, were going through a batch of papers and docketing them tidily on a dainty Georgian table. Parry, pulling at his pipe, was standing by an oak corner cupboard, the contents of which a third policeman was examining with stolid efficiency.

An odd trick of memory recalled clearly to Culver the first day that he had seen Ann, when she had come in through the window to grope in that same cupboard for cigarettes.

"Bill hates me messing about in her cupboards," she had said then. Naturally. He realised why now, and why, perhaps, Bill had complained of Ann.

Parry looked up at the moment.

"We're still drawing blank," he laughed. "There's one of those windows here somewhere. We found one in the church tower, but the other—I'm beginning to think the lady took it away with her. What do you think?"

Culver found himself thoroughly embarrassed. It was as though Parry were deliberately challenging him. But he knew from Bill's scanty luggage that the suggestion was not true.

"Shouldn't be surprised," he answered, trying to echo Parry's mood.

Parry strolled with him across the room.

"She's fooled us right enough," he said. "There's not a thing we could prove against her yet. Ann knows the house inside out, and she can't offer any ideas."

"Where is Ann?" Culver asked, with an unfamiliar gruffness.

"I don't know, old man; she was about just now. She's pretty sick, after all her work. She was down here last night putting the plain-clothes men wise before they sent down with the warrant. But the fair Bill slipped through their fingers. She was a great woman."

Ann came into the room at the moment. She was looking terribly tired and sad, Culver thought. She gave him a casual little nod, and addressed Parry.

"Oh, gosh! I am fed up with it, F. P.," she said. Then to Culver: "He's told you, I suppose? Bill's won. Short of taking the floor up, I think we've searched every inch of the house. And I was supposed to know!"

Parry moved away to answer some question of the man at the corner cupboard, and Ann and Culver walked slowly to the top of the room. He sensed her self-consciousness and tried to talk easily, but she answered him in a despondent tone of bravado.

They sat down for a moment on the chest, Bill's treasured Flemish dower chest, and Ann asked for a cigarette.

"You do some guessing, Richard Culver," she said, more in her old lazy way. "You seem to have been spotting winners all along. I've backed a dud this time."

He was glad to note the friendlier tone of her voice, and he wanted to continue it.

"No, Ann. Things fell at me; I didn't guess much—not even your part." She flushed and, to cover what he felt to be a blunder, he went on wildly: "What about this thing?" He kicked the chest. But his idle remark started a train of thought. Bill had always been curious about that chest. He looked down at it

with suddenly awakened interest. "Hop up a second, Ann," he continued, "let's have a look."

Ann's face was intent; she seemed already to have absorbed something of his thoughts. Together they raised the cumbrous lid, and Culver tapped the massive timbers. "It might," he murmured, speaking as much to himself as to Ann. He bent down and lifted one end of the great thing, and it felt as heavy as it looked.

Ann called crisply across the room: "F. P., come here a minute. Richard Culver's got another brain-wave."

Parry came over to them.

"I don't know," Culver said, now in the toils of his own imagination. "But I was thinking—it's heavy, of course, but then with all this ironwork—and the timbers. Did you ever see anything quite so thick in a piece of furniture? Suppose—yes, and there was a dud end when I first saw it." He was down on his knees running his fingers carefully over the repaired end. He shook it, and it moved slightly.

Culver looked up excitedly. Ann and Parry were regarding him with tense interest.

"By Gad! it is, Parry," he said. "She stowed the stuff away in here somehow."

Franklin Parry, less gentle than Culver, stooped without a word and gave a great wrench to the end which Culver had been examining. It slid upwards. The next moment it was free and on the floor, and Bill Coke's hiding-place was discovered.

The thick timbers of that huge chest had been hollowed out with infinite care. Even so, on either side of the cavities there was a good half-inch of wood. Bill must have had the whole thing in pieces to carry out her work. The bottom, a rough board of oak, had been split flatways and cunningly glued together.

And it was there they found, packed delicately in a safe nest of thick, brown felt, a jig-saw puzzle of things that looked like pieces of slate until you held them to the light. And then the rich colours of one of Bidely's thirteenth-century windows glowed in them.

The glass had been entirely removed from its lead—that had found a resting-place in the mud of Oldford's river—and Culver fingered the serrated edges of the precious stuff reverently. Scraps of lichen clung to it in places; other pieces were bitten deep with the corrosion of seven hundred years. There was a quaint little pink-faced saint, with his head set stiffly awry. Culver felt uncommonly glad he was not going into alien hands after so many years in this peaceful land of heather and marsh.

One of the policemen engaged in the search laughed: "Don't look worth while pinching to me. Now this—this is the stuff."

He had come upon the Lowenstein miniature in its glittering jewelled frame, stowed away in a neat little cell of its own. Parry took it from the man's hands and passed it to Culver.

"I think we've seen this before, old man," he said solemnly.

Culver smiled absent-mindedly. He was still amazed at his own fortunate discovery.

"All this was going to America," he said. "You're right, Parry, she had big brains, that woman."

Parry laughed inconsequently, and tapped his forehead.

"'Got it here all right,' as Mr. Harris says. Poor old Harris! he's over in some stuffy police-court to-day dealing with his pal Friend. He'd like to have been in on this."

They pulled the ancient chest to pieces, and tore from it all its treasures, and a treasure chest, indeed, it

was, with precious relics of a score of robberies, cunningly secreted in its timbers.

Certainly Bill had entrusted many eggs to one basket, but if that basket had got through the American Customs, there was rich gleaning to come from the harvest. Parry and the policemen were filled with admiration for the cleverness of it all. Ann seemed dazed. She spoke very little, and appeared wrapped in her own gloomy thoughts. Culver watched her frequently, and read in her face the bitterness of defeat, and despite his gladness of that failure, most eagerly he longed to soothe the bitterness. And he could conceive but one way of doing it.

IV

Reaction followed swiftly the excitement of Culver's discovery. The studio was littered with the treasures of the Flemish chest, and the policemen were at work upon the mechanical, official inventorying of the find. Parry had gone off to telephone, and Culver and Ann stood gazing silently at the steady downpour from the leaden sky.

Ann was frankly depressed, but to his joy, not averse from his company, Culver thought. He was trying to rally her with inconsequent talk, and told her of his night in the tower of Bidely Church.

She answered very little, and interrupted once with a characteristic :

"Oh, Lord! Let's get out of this. I can't stand this house any longer."

"Come to lunch," he said quickly.

"If you like," she replied, without much enthusiasm. "But where? I don't want to go back to the Palace."

An idea came to him, but he expressed it fearfully. It was too much to hope she would agree.

"Keep an old promise and come to Salthithe," he said.

He saw her start, and some of the despondency went from her tired eyes.

"You're full of bright ideas," she answered mockingly. "It's just on two now, and by the time we get there——"

"You said tea, you know," he broke in.

"Oh, all right—come on," she agreed, and sent a great surge of thankfulness through Culver's heart.

They drove through the rain across the bleak common-land, cold and sad under the grey sky, with only the ever-faithful gorse to lend a touch of bright colour to the sodden autumn landscape.

Ann was still bitter and moody, but as they passed the signpost at the road to Pryke, she said, with a hard laugh:

"That's as far as we got last time. Remember that day? You were being nursed then, Richard Culver: taken out of Oldford so that you shouldn't run up against Carl Mingay. I saw to it that the tyre went and we had no spare wheel. I used to think I was fooling you and Bill Coke beautifully. But you both won in the end. You'd be sick, too, wouldn't you?"

Culver took this Heaven-sent chance, to find which he had been puzzling throughout the drive.

"Bill didn't fool you," he said quietly. "I did."

"I know you did," she nodded.

"I mean about her getting away," he went on stubbornly.

Ann slowed the car, and looked at him incredulously. There was something in her expression that almost made him lose his nerve, and he rushed the words to get them over.

"What do you mean?" she said sharply.

"I mean I drove Mrs. Coke out of Oldford about half-past eight last night. I wanted her to get away for several reasons."

The car had stopped abruptly, and Ann was glaring at him.

"What the other reasons were, don't matter now. But the chief one was that—that I didn't want her to know—your share in the business. I drove her—to a station. And let the real police find her if they want to. I don't want you to have any more to do with this—sneaking business—Ann—my dear."

Ann made no answer, and he tried hard to read in her astounded face the working of her mind. She looked furious and baffled, and a little sceptical, as if she were trying to think something out before she trusted herself to reply. The cold rain drove in monotonous patter upon the hood of the car. Ann had pulled up so suddenly that the engine had stopped, and but for her hard breathing, only the rain broke the silence.

When Ann spoke it came as an immense relief to him.

"And you—knowing what you did—helped her to get away?" she demanded, in a low voice, each word coming with deliberation.

"I did," he answered, in defiance. "And I'd do it again."

Ann seemed to be holding herself in check; to be fighting down some tremendous emotion, and in her grave eyes Culver thought he saw the end of all his hopes. Then she sighed, almost as if she were struggling with tears, and a queer, bewildered smile came over her face.

"You dear, delightful, sentimental idiot," she said. "Was there ever such a fool in all this world?" Her

lips were quivering. "But I'm glad, I'm glad you did it. It was sweet of you, so like you. Oh, damn this engine! Start the thing, please——" She was still fighting hard with herself. "We'll talk about it later."

But Dick Culver knew then, knew that he could say what he had been longing to say for weeks past; and he laughed confidently.

"We'll talk about it now, an it please you, my dear. And I don't care how long the car stays here. Come, Ann, be a dear, sentimental idiot yourself—won't you?" His arms went out to her in instinctive appeal.

She still looked mystified, but her face no longer betrayed any bitterness.

"Richard Culver, don't be an ass," she said slowly. "You mustn't—not here. Look, there are people coming."

He glanced up, swiftly, to see a plodding farm-cart in the distance.

"I don't care how many people are coming," he replied. "Ann, you want someone to look after you—always. I'm the someone. Please—dear——"

"But I'm a sneak, and a busybody, and a prying professional, and a—a—failure," she answered suddenly.

"Ann, I love you," he said simply. Then impulsively he took her in his arms: "And you've got to love me—got to, do you hear?" he repeated. "Got to."

"Gosh! But we are a couple of soppy idiots," she whispered huskily. And they never knew when that creaking cart passed them by.

